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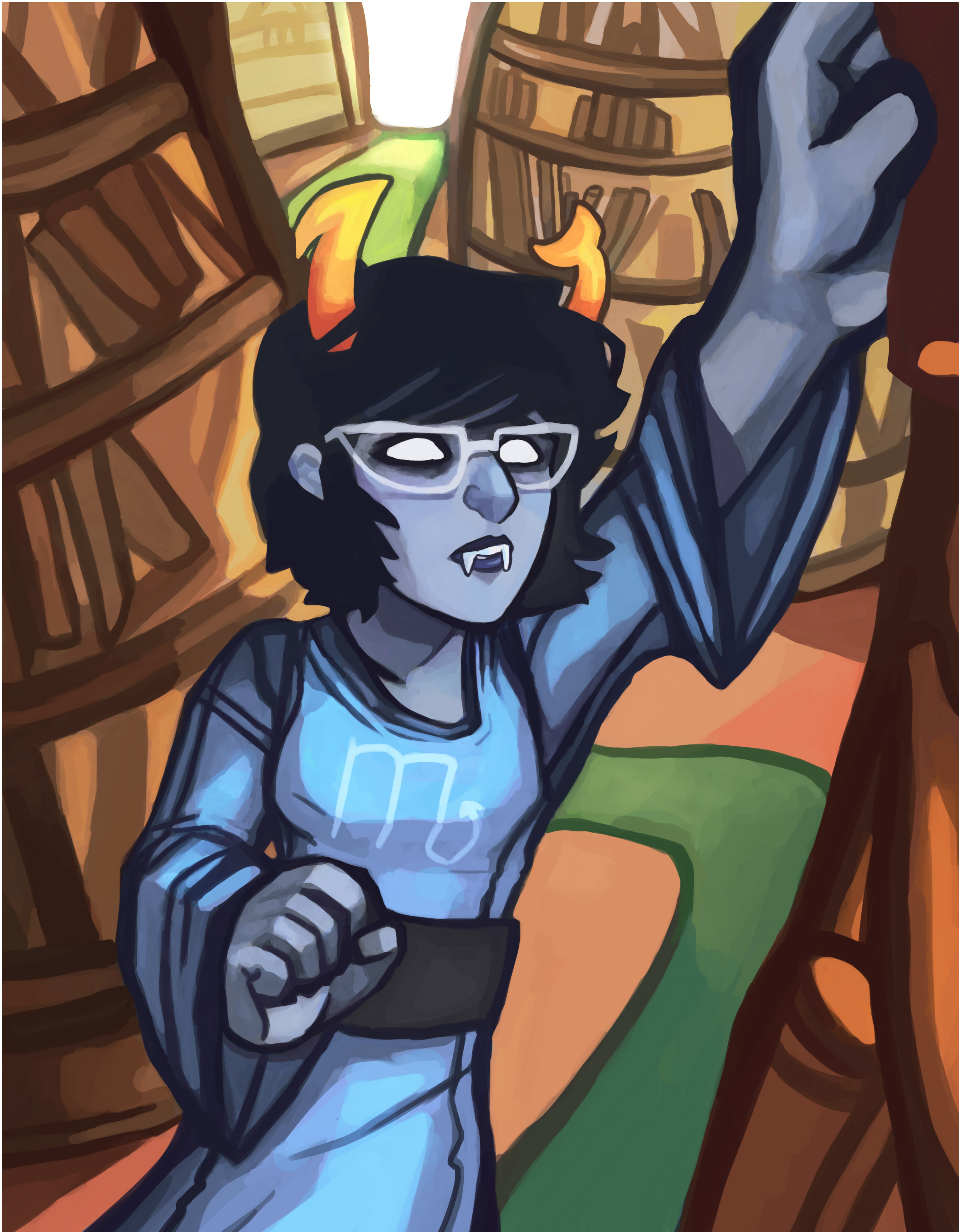
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With my Thread & Needle

- TheFastestClockInTheUniverse/ CosmosChroniker

There was a crowd. There always was. No matter how many times this dream came around, so too came the onlookers, gaping and gawking at the spectacle.

Is this is a dream? I'm dead. How can I dream if I'm dead?

Vision, then. You can see them where the bubbles are thinnest. Windows to another world.

Memories?

No. Never that.

From her vantage point - hands roughly bound behind her back, knees stinging from where she'd been shoved to the ground, cracking and slicing open the skin - she could see everything. But only one figure was in focus.

***Who killed Cock Robin? "I", said the Sparrow
"With my bow and arrow, I killed Cock Robin".***

Porrim jerked awake, shuddering as the fist of terror - wrapped around her heart and squeezing it into a hollow nothingness - loosened its grip.

She didn't think she had really been *asleep*, but sometimes when the endless night that was their afterlife dragged on for too long, she would get this hot, fuzzy feeling behind her eyes, as if her thinkpan had overheated. Then, she'd drift away into these (memories?) dreamscapes, where images from another life would grip her until she could find the strength to pull free.

Porrim took a few deep breaths, then stretched out her limbs like a luxuriating purrbeast and rotated her wrists and ankles until some of the strain in her limbs abated.

She took the time to splash her face with water from the sink, and then took a long, cool drink. She'd have a long, *hot* drink later when she could face asking someone for a tiny sip of blood, but for now the cold water made her feel more alert, and considerably less rattled.

Not as if I particularly need to eat or drink. I'm dead.

It's still nice, though. And if my dream taps are still working, I'm damn well going to drink dream-water.

Composed again, Porrim found a hair-tie, and swept her mane of glossy black hair up into a bun to keep it out of the way. Since she'd told everyone she was taking some afterlife-alone-time, she might as well work on her project again.

Gathering her materials, she made herself comfortable on her favourite chintz-y chair (*yes, alone it's a monstrosity, but placed in front of the accent wall in my minimalist living block it's a marvellous centre-piece. And really, really, comfortable*).

The activity should be easy, really, she thought as the unfamiliar needles slipped in her clumsy grasp, *it's a simple enough process.*

Cross one needle over the other; poke one needle through the loop of yarn on the other needle, wrap yarn round that needle, then pull it gently off so the yarn was now on the other side. Rinse and repeat. Except every stitch required so much concentration, and if she didn't concentrate she began to drop stitches, and wound up with a line of uneven, bobbly wool.

It just wouldn't *do*.

Porrim sighed, and put the practise knitting down. How was she to make a jumper if she couldn't knit a simple quilt patch without making these silly mistakes?

This was all Kankri's fault really. Why on *earth* he felt it necessary to go parading around in his trousers - hoiked up pretty much to his armpits and held in place with that ghastly belt...

Not that this is a fashion-thing, really, a treacherous part of her mind whispered.

Porrim was hardly one to avoid uncomfortable truths - she had no problem about enjoying a number of on-and-off flings, and didn't mind the gossip they started. She didn't mind talking frankly and honestly about her needs as a Rainbow Drinker. She *certainly* had no issue with arguing against Kankri's vacuous crap he liked to peddle under the guise of "social justice" - despite the fact he had no real understanding about the subjects he repeatedly martyred himself for.

But admitting she was trying to learn to knit in order to.....

No.

She shuddered. Porrim wasn't quite ready to face that head on. Instead, she flicked through the crafting manuals she had, plus a few knitting patterns and notes she'd found in the dream bubbles. She'd even seen a few video tutorials saved on an old husktop, which had helped her learn how to "cast on". However, the videos were frustrating - the elderly human lady in the video could *click-*

clack through her first three rows of knitting in the space of a few seconds. She wasn't even looking down at the flashing needles! It was galling. Particularly as Porrim prided herself on her dress-making abilities. She had natural good taste, could pick out someone's colours with a cursory glance, and had been whipping up various items of *haute couture* clothing since she was practically a grub.

Still, she believed herself capable of learning to knit, and it wasn't like she had better things to do.

(Although she had half a mind to see if Aranea fancied a quick -)

No. She could only put up with so much more nonsense from the Insufferable. Better to get this done first, and *then* find some new way to amuse herself.

Honestly - why did Kankri have to be such a grub about this?? Yes, it could get cold in the dream bubbles - but there was no need for him to go about his annoying daily cornering of victims to lecture while his teeth chattered, and his fingers turned almost blue.

Why she even gave a shit she could hardly fathom -

A child tottered over to her, raising his little arms up as a plea for comfort. His knees were skinned, and dangerous, bright red blood stained his trousers.

"Here now little one, how did that happen?" She said, smiling to show him it was okay, while her mind went through turmoil. What if someone had seen? What if the drones had followed him? Had he left a little spotted trail of damning crimson blood leading right back to their current hide-out?

"Playing," was all he mumbled, and after the cuts were cleaned and bandaged - and, of course, given a magic kiss - they were forgotten.

Though not by her. The second she had lulled him off to sleep, she followed the little red dots, wiping them from the slick stone of the cave floor, and liberally churning the sand and dirt outside, until she was confident they would be safe. For now, at least.

***"Who caught his blood?" "I," said the Fish,
"With my little dish, I caught his blood."***

That wasn't me! Porrim thought furiously, shoving the thought (the memory?) away. *Well it was in a way - but I'm not her. And Kankri's certainly not him. So why do I care? Why can't I stop myself from caring?*

She sighed and picked the knitting up again. You learn from your mistakes, isn't that what they said?

Needle into stitch, wrap the loop around, tuck it under and pull it out and over to the side. Rinse, repeat.

She stuck at it for a while, starting to get into a rhythm; needle, loop, stitch, needle, loop, stitch -

But while her hands were busy, her mind was perilously unoccupied, and as she stubbornly forced herself to knit, the images kept coming.

The little boy, younger here, his eyes red and sparkling with happiness. Toddling over on his little legs, he almost tripped on the hem of his cloak. He smiled when he saw her, his teeth as sharp as the two nubby horns on his head - that is to say, not very sharp at all.

He was a creature of smooth, blunt edges. In a world where everyone else was jagged and sharp.

She let him toddle a few more steps then swept him up and spun him in the air, before cuddling him close and pressing a kiss to his soft little cheek.

He laughed - a delighted bubble of joy, and her heart ached. She was at once so full of love, and so full of fear for her little one. How could this soft little being live long in a world of callous violence?

It shouldn't have to be this way, but it was for now. And for now all she could do was ensure he made it through to the end of every night.

Being a Rainbow Drinker, and a jade-blood, certainly helped. She was able to venture out in the midday heat, collecting food and supplies under cover of the blazing sun. Jade-bloods were taught from the very first day of their schoolfeeding to care for the mothergrubs. So, it was second nature to care for this little one, no matter how unnatural his ruby red blood was to her.

How long could it last though? That was the eternal, terrifying question that she refused to answer. The drones were ever-searching to cull those too weak, or too different. The indigo-bloods and the purple-bloods would kill him without a second thought if they were ever discovered -

The thought of losing her little one; the thought of never hearing his happy burbling laughter, or seeing him toddle on his chubby little legs, or having his tiny soft hand touch her luminescent skin

with wonder -

It didn't bear thinking about.

*Who saw him die? "I", said the fly,
"With my little eye, I saw him die."*

Porrim realised with a start that she was silently crying while her hands went through the motions of *needle, loop, stitch*. It really shouldn't affect her this much - it didn't even happen to her for fuck's sake!

But apparently the vision of that tiny troll was enough to tug at her heart-strings, not least because she knew how the story ended.

She shuddered. *That. Wasn't. Me.*

She had seen Kankri die, that much was true - they'd *all* died, that's why they were all here... But sometimes when she looked at him, for a moment - just for the tiniest moment - he was *him*, and everything in her cried out with joy.

You're here! You're safe! The words forced their way up her throat and it was all she could do to clack her teeth together and hold them tightly behind her lips.

...Kankri could tell, though. Porrim was sure. Oblivious and self-important as he was, she knew there were times he could tell that she was looking at him through a "mother's" eyes.

It infuriated her. It was so sick a joke even a Makara wouldn't crack a smile. She had spent her whole fucking life - and several sweeps after it ended - trying to fight against the ridiculous idea that all jade-bloods are meant to be a *lusus-figure* - mother-figure - whatever you wanted to call it.

She'd always felt the weight of that expectation pushing down on her shoulders, or trapping her like burning shackles. The fact that everyone in her society took one look at the jade-bloods and assumed they would be happy to work with the mother grubs - *expected* them to work solely for the propagation of the troll species.

The cloaked patriarchy she saw back on Beforus, the law enforcers and the politicians – and the agency and power those of the higher blood-castes dominated by men - had always incensed her. Yes, they had been ruled by a fushia blood empress, but as it turns out, she was merely a pawn of *yet another* man. Then there were the jade-bloods – mostly women, and all required to work as

carers of the mother grub.

I never wanted that to be my role, but as it turns out, in another life, being this "mother" figure was my entire identity. Oh certainly I was a disciple, I fought for change, and paid for my rebelliousness... But the end of the day, it turns out I left the breeding grounds only to walk straight back into that maternal role.

Even in this life I end up being a Maid of Space. And what do Space players do? They create! They propagate! At least "Maid" was a powerful class. But it was as if the game was taunting me – or, worse, had examined me in some way and decided that, however much I may try to fight it, this was who I really am under all my protestations.

And then the joke to end all jokes – the vast glub, if you will. In this timeline, in my personal connection with Kankri? He thinks my view of gender inequality isn't worth speaking about, let alone fighting for.

Porrim laughed bitterly, and looked down at the knitting in her hands. She was getting better, that was for sure. The rows looked neater, and the stitches tighter – but she was still deciding whether Kankri even deserved the gift she was planning. He really was the most annoying, arrogant, vociferous, *nuisance* –

In fact, that was enough. Decision made. She wasn't going to pander to the pretentious little git any longer. He wasn't *him*. She wasn't *her*, and that was that.

**Who'll be the parson? "I," said the Rook,
"With my little book, I'll be the Parson."**

*

"Kanny, if you're that cold, go find your hive – or anyone's hive for that matter, and put another layer on," She snapped, after her brief conversation with Kankri had, once again, been interrupted with shivering, teeth chattering, and over-the-top gestures of rubbing his hands together.

"Porrim, please, how many more times must I inform that I do not enjoy that form of address - and by the by, you *do* realise you interrupted me mid-flow?"

"Did I?" she asked with scathing sarcasm that sailed merrily right over his nubby-horned head.

“Yes. I was just explaining that it’s important to consider – *brrrr*, excuse me,” he said, pausing to rub his arms vigorously in the chill air of the dream bubble.

Porrim lit her eyes up for the sole purpose of making sure he could see her roll them.

“Sorry, *Kanny*, this is going to have to wait – I just remembered I have... plans with... someone.”

“Really, Porrim,” he said, almost stamping his foot in childish exacerbation, “Here I am, freezing my horns off while generously donating my time to explain some basic principles of social justice – and you’re going to run off to – to – to see someone else?” He finished meekly, his cheeks flushing with that muted pink that meant he’d got to the end of his train of thought and found himself at a conclusion he found embarrassing.

As a matter of fact, Porrim just wanted to get away from his droning, but she got a kick out of him unable to talk about her concupiscent relationships.

“I’ll come find you after I’ve... *seen* someone. Okay?” She raised an eyebrow and tapped her foot. It was a little mean, but she’d only wanted to say hello, and had ending up being trapped for what felt like hours.

“I... yes. Okay. I suppose that’s alright,” he mumbled, shivering miserably.

Oh for fuck’s sake, said a voice at the back of her mind, *You’re going to go work on the jumper, aren’t you?*

Only to shut him up! She argued back, as her swift steps took her along the winding route that led to her hive. (Well, most of the time. Dream bubbles were frustratingly fickle, after all.) *I’m definitely not doing it because I feel a – a pang of longing whenever I see his stupid smug little face. NOT because I’m trying to mother that self-righteous little grub –*

With his tiny, useless horns, and weak, skinny little form, and that tiny smile he does sometimes when he sees me –

Shit. Shut up.

(Not that. Never that.)

Once back in her hive and curled up in her favourite chair, Porrim lifted the half-complete jumper from her little projects-basket and examined it carefully. Each stitch was neat and secure, with no strange little loops from dropped stitches. It was, in fact, very good work. Her five separate practise pieces had served their purpose beyond simply driving her up the wall every time she’d made a mistake.

If she could get the main body finished (*today? In the next few hours? Does time even exist anymore?*) soon, it shouldn't be too hard to get the sleeves attached, and then she'd be done.

She looked at the sleeves where they were carefully folded in the basket. Bright, ruby-red, and coiled, looking for all the world like some dangerous hiss-beasts had wriggled their way into her hive... Would Kankri be pleased she'd chosen the colour of his mutant blood? Or would she get a lecture on insensitivity for highlighting his outcast blood colour for all the world to see?

She sighed and started click-clacking way at the next row. Impossible to know, really. At any rate it would be good to get the damn thing done soon – because just the sight of the colour could send her mind back to...

Porrim was back in a dream again, bound and shoved to the ground while the crowd - many headed, multi-horned and vicious as only a passive bystander looking on at a great injustice could be - jeered and cheered. Beside her, however, was one once-melodious voice, now hoarse and constricted with grief, sobbing so hard the dirt before them turned to mud.

She couldn't take her eyes off the hanging figure before her, but she knew who it was next to her, weeping herself dry. The girl. The beautiful, joyous, always laughing girl, who'd made her little one – now her big one (soon to be her dead one) so happy. She'd pulled him out of his shell after sweeps of hiding, smoothed the rough edges from her gruff boy who had always had to be defensive and suspicious of strangers. She was a ball of energy, and besides making her little one happy, she'd been instrumental in the revolution – drumming up support, arranging secret meetings and keeping her little one grounded. She'd made sure he never let his movement go to his head, and any pomposity could be deflated with a few gentle teases.

Now, all the sweeps of joy and laughter and hope and love, were about to be swept away – and she couldn't protect them, any of them. Impotent fury clenched in her chest until she thought she'd suffocate. And beside her the sweet girl with the warmest smile and the dirtiest laugh sobbed until she retched, and all the while the crowd looked on -

*"Who'll be chief mourner?" "I," said the Dove,
"I mourn for my love, I'll be chief mourner."*

There now, wasn't that better? She forced herself to look critically at the work before her, while trying to banish the sound of Meul – no – the *Disciple's* tears from her mind.

With the main body complete, she just had to work on the collar, then cast-off and attach the arms. Simple.

...After all, she was *allowed* to feel protective of Kankri, right? That's how people felt about their friends, *right*? It wasn't that she was giving in to the role society had carved for her because, let's face it, "society" was a meaningless concept in this surreal after-life they were all living - or rather, *existing* in.

It certainly wasn't that she had allowed herself to be goaded by this game. *Maid of Space*? Hah! She was no maid –

Made of Space. As in, there's an empty hollow in that never-beating heart of yours – one that you simply have to fill –

No. No, it wasn't that at all, she thought furiously, detaching the end of her wool from the ball with her teeth. *I'm just a benevolent person, giving my good friend Kankri a present, in the hope that he'll shut the fuck up about suffering from the cold -!*

Because he's never actually known suffering, has he?

He's never actually been persecuted, or on-the-run. Never been starving in some dark, dank little hiding place, clutching his love to his chest to stop her panicky tears from giving them away. Never seen his best friend dragged from him screaming and thrashing – or seen his mother beaten and put in chains –

"I did not spend my evening making breakfast for you to turn your nose up at it," Porrim said, a playful smile dancing on her lips, as she watched her little one – all grown up now – laughing and whispering with the Psiioniic.

"I'm eating it!" he protested, shovelling a spoonful into his mouth, and then nearly choking when he saw Psii do the same – but somehow managing to spill half of it down the front of his yellow jumpsuit.

"Hey, ma!" the Disciple said, as she practically skipped into the cave. "Look - I was only out there an hour or so, and I only went and found a whole herd of antlerbeasts!"

"Meat?" Psii said eagerly, more of his breakfast dripping off the ends of his fangs and splatting onto the floor.

“Yes, I have meat, you disgusting boy,” she said, with a sweet giggle, before darting over to wipe Psii’s face with her sleeve.

“Eurgh – gerrof – I’m not a grub!”

“Yeah? Well you eat like one!” She laughed, and then leapt back acrobatically before his playful swipe could get anyway near her.

Instead, it knocks over his friend’s breakfast –

“Oh really now!?” Porrim sighed.

“It wasn’t me!” The Signless yelled, raising his hands up *not guilty*, and trying to conceal the huge grin threatening to take over his face.

“Enough!” She yelled, though she too couldn’t quite hold back her mirth, “If you’ve got carcasses, you can gut and skin them outside, and then the boys can help you hang them up round the back. Then you are going to *wash*,” The Disciple scrunched her nose in disgust, and Porrim continued louder, “And then – and only then – are you going to get a bowl of my delicious stew. Which the boys are currently spreading all over the floor.”

“I’ll help with gutting!” her little one announced, jumping up and hurrying the Disciple back outside the cave. Porrim can’t help but smile. Young love.

“Sorry for the mess,” Psii said sheepishly, “The stew’s really good – I mean it! It’s just these stupid fangs- ”

“Oh, is that it? I thought it was because you were too busy mucking around to appreciate all my efforts,” she laid the back of her hand against her forehead and pretended to swoon, but he seemed unsure if she was joking or not – crouching hesitantly over the bowls and spilled breakfast. “I’m kidding,” she said with a chuckle, and he relaxed.

“Phew – thought you were gunna put *me* in your next meal for a moment there.”

“Don’t tempt me,” she teased, with a wink. “Now help me clean this up – we’ve got a big day ahead of us!”

*Who’ll dig his grave? “I”, said the Owl,
“With my pick and shovel, I’ll dig his grave.”*

"Told you I'd come find you," Porrim said softly, suppressing a laugh when Kankri jumped half out of his skin.

"Oh-! Porrim, you scared me – I -"

"I have a present for you," she said, jumping in before he could get going with whatever lecture he had in store for her today. "I hope you'll like it."

She'd thought long and hard about whether to wrap it up, but decided that would be making too big a deal out of the whole thing. Instead, she held the finished jumper neatly folded under her arm, and handed it over.

Kankri stared at it, his fingers moving over the soft wool.

"It's a jumper. Because you're so cold all the time." He was looking up at her now, with a funny little furrow between his brows. *Great. He hates it. The red was a bad idea. That or he thinks this is another pale solicitation. (And it's not?)* "I found some knitting needles and wool in one of the dream bubbles, and you know I like making clothes -"

She was babbling now, and she knew it – but maybe if she could play it off as no big deal, he wouldn't take it so poorly...?

"You... you made this? For me?" He asked, his voice lacking its usual pomposity. For a moment he really did seem like that little grub she saw in every other bubble.

"Yes."

"Oh... well," he let it unfurl, and held it against himself, "Well, ahem, thank you for your kindness Porrim, it is much appreciated."

Aaaaand *there* was the pomposity back, but he was smiling that tiny smile up at her and –

Are you seriously about to cry over this?? Pull yourself together!

Luckily, as he tugged the jumper over his head, she had a moment to blink the incipient tears away. It was maybe a little big on him, but he turned this way and that, and then gave himself a little hug –

A part of her *ached* to reach out for him, and tug him in close –

And then Kankri gave a little cough, and the moment passed.

"It's – um, it's very nice. My thanks again. And you – you found the perfect colour, too."

That bright, dangerous red now matched the blush rising in his cheeks.

She knew it wouldn't be long before he was back to his usual nonsense, but for now, in this bubble, in this moment, he was *her's*, and that was what mattered.

*Who'll make the shroud? "I", said the Beetle
"With my thread and needle, I'll make the shroud."*

It had been a day like any other, when she'd come across the tiny grub, stuck on its back, its little legs swiping at the air, while it wailed loud enough to bring the roof down.

She'd carefully helped him flip back over, and found herself confronted with a bright, red – *wrong* – carapace.

"Oh-!"

Later, much later, she'd look back on this night, and wonder why she'd done what she did. But in that moment, it wasn't a choice. She knew it, as she scooped him up - and his soft little head had nuzzled into her arms as naturally as if he'd always meant to be here – there was only ever one thing she could do.

It was impulsive, certainly, but it was as if fate had suddenly seized her by the throat – she had no choice. So she ran, with her precious, perilous charge carefully wrapped in her robes, until she came to their first, desolate hiding place.

When she unwrapped him, he sucked in a shaky breath, and she knew he was going to start with those bellowing cries again – cries that could very well bring their deaths down upon them.

"It's okay, little one," she whispered, gently stroking his cheek, "You're safe with me now. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, you hear me? You're safe, my little one."

***All the birds of the air fell a-sighing and a-sobbing,
When they heard the bell toll for poor Cock Robin.***

by TheFastestClockInTheUniverse ☞-13

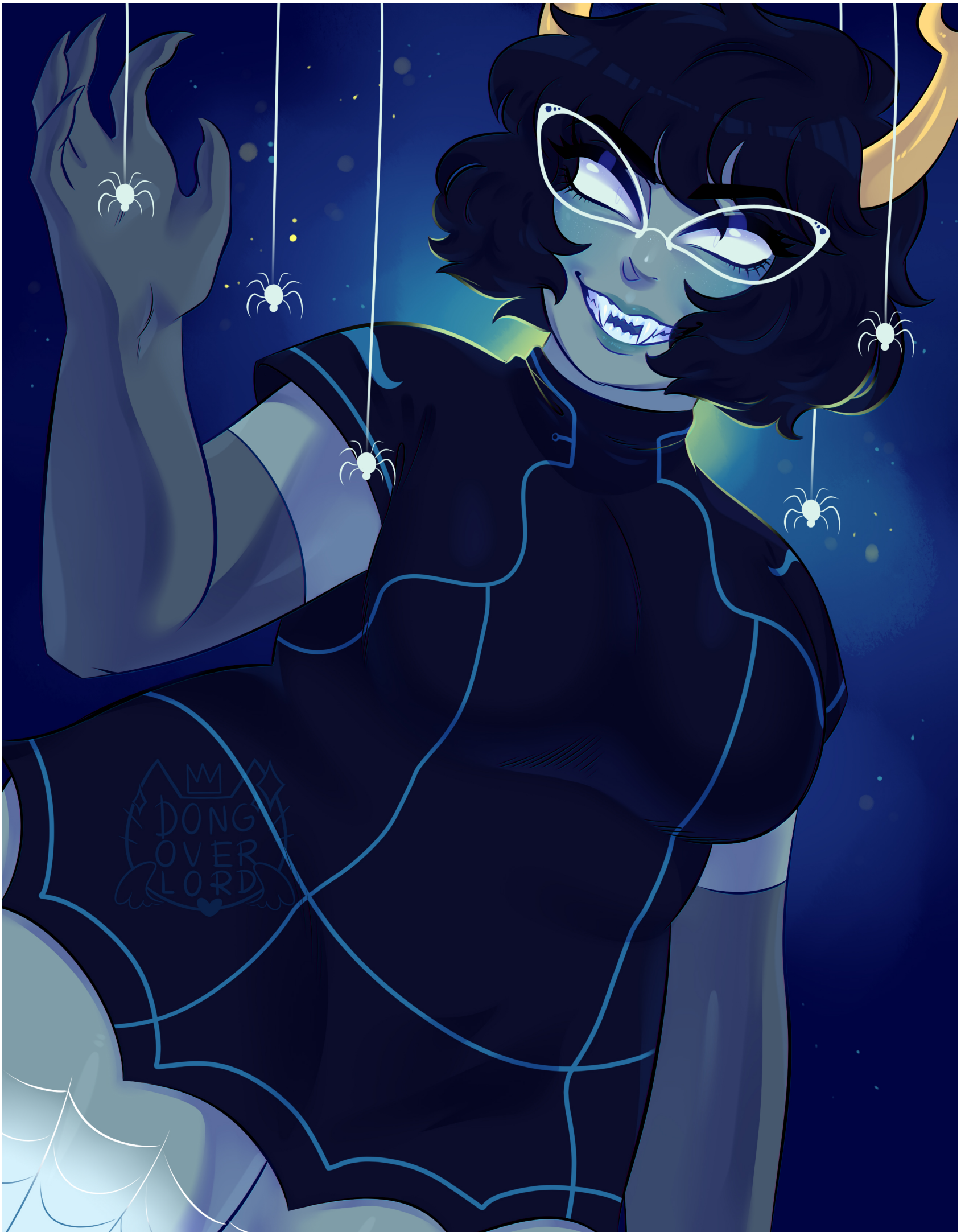














Notes on Human Psychology

- TheFastestClockInTheUniverse/ CosmosChroniker

“Sikeology? Sykology? Sikeologie?” Cronus muttered and cursed under his breath as he attempted to search the husk - no - *laptop*.

He had found the documents folder easily enough, but there were so many cryptically named files, and just typing in the search bar had so far been futile.

Cronus tried one more spelling of the unfamiliar word and rapped his knuckles on the cluttered desk when “No items match your search” popped up again. Okay, scratch that. Better search manually... Not that that would be a problem, of course, but there was something ominous about this little room he’d found in the dream bubbles, and he had hoped he’d be able to find what he needed quickly, before absconding the fuck outta there.

The room was large, but annoyingly cluttered in a way that fostered a sense of claustrophobia. The bookcase was crammed full of books and the desk was haphazardly piled with notebooks and papers. Even and the floor was littered with clothing and various miscellaneous items. Upon first entering, Cronus had wrinkled his nose in distaste. How hard was it to just shove everything in a cupboard?

Now however, after searching and scrolling through endless strange little folder pathways, it was the window that was causing him discomfort. It was... eerie. Yes - that’s the word he wanted. That *eerie* orange glow from the window that made him feel slightly on edge. The light cast strange shadows around the room, shadows that seemed to unfurl and move ever so slightly in the flickering light, like the tentacles of some great leviathan, writhing and grasping in the deepest, darkest part of the ocean...

Just thinking about it now made his fins flare out, as they did instinctively underwater when diving deep down into the dark places. The membranes quivered in the air, trying to sense any tiny movement or sound that might suggest an approaching threat. All his instincts were telling him there was something coming, something waiting to pounce -

He whipped round, for what must’ve been the tenth time already, and yet again, there was nothing to see but the human “bed”, festooned with crumpled blankets and pillows, lit by the orange glow and casting strange shadows across the floor.

He shivered, and mentally told himself to get his shit together. It was just a “bedroom” - and a shitty one at that. He had research to do.

Cronus turned back round to the desk with a renewed feeling of purpose - right up until the moment that his knees smashed into the hardwood of the desk. Once he’d finished swearing, a tiny voice in the back of his head pointed out that he’d barely moved his legs. And yet it seemed the desk had crept forward enough somehow to injure him -

Nope nope nope we’re not doin’ this -

It was the stupid small human's fault. Her with her stupid small legs. Yeah.

It took what felt like an eternity - hunched over at the desk, sifting through folders and skipping over what seemed to be a complicated story about Wizards and an incredibly in-depth game walkthrough for Sburp - but eventually he'd found what he was looking for.

Under the folder labelled "PSYC NOTES", he clicked through to find a very well organised series of folders with titles such as "Developmental Psychology", "Social Psychology" and the like. Still, he quickly tired of reading through ancient experiments involving recalling stories of "car crashes", humans being asked to press a button to shock another human, and what happened when you put a bunch of humans together in a "prison" - whatever that was.

However, before he could give up on the task at hand, he'd found a folder titled "Loneliness and Social Isolation".

Not that he was lonely, of course. He spoke to people every day - hell, he'd spoken to Kankri about how serious he was about the whole "humankin" thing earlier.

...And if he was isolated it was only because everyone around him were such inferior idiots.

Still, with a quick look around him to check no one had entered the bubble, he clicked on the folder. Nothing wrong with a little curiosity, was there?

Humming tunelessly under his breath, he started clicking through the documents, videos, and academic papers - liberally highlighted and annotated with lavender text.

At first it was entertaining, if a little, well, alien to him. Apparently, humans thousands of years ago were these creatures called "monkeys" - but only certain types, not all monkeys... and monkeys still existed until the whole "end of civilisation" thing... But apparently some human behaviours could be found in their simian ancestors. Wild. There was a grainy documentary video detailing an experiment where a tiny wriggler of a monkey had the choice to either go into a part of a cage where there was a pretend lusus made of fur, or a lusus made out of a wire-frame which dispensed milk. The monkey would always choose to cuddle itself up to the fur lusus, even if it meant going hungry, as physical contact was so important to humans.

Duly noted; it seemed... significant.

The orange light in the room flickered for a moment, as though something had passed by outside the window. Cronus shivered. Was it getting cold in here? He had no hairs on the back of his arms to stand up, as humans did, but it suddenly felt chilly enough for even a coldblood to feel it.

Another flicker and another gust of cold air. He didn't turn around. There was nothing there, after all.

Keeping his eyes fixed to the glowing plasma screen in front of him, Cronus rubbed at his arms and hugged himself to try warm up.

But it's not just that, is it? A little voice in his head whispered, Humans hug themselves and each other to feel comfort. What's out there that you feel you need comforting - hmm?

Nothing. There's nothing fucking out there. Just bubbles and dead people-

While we're at it, when was the last time someone voluntarily hugged you? Or held your hand? (Has anyone ever done either of those things? Ever?)

Cronus' fins flared up again, this time in anger.

Oh course they had! For example - uh - for example...

When he was little! When he was barely more than a grub, he'd had friends, hadn't he? Proper friends - not just people who barely tolerated his presence. Him and Meenah would go swimming together, exploring the darkest, deepest oceans of Beforus - where the giant squid and kraken lurked. When it got too dark for him to see properly, or when he got too scared, she would reach out and grab his hand - moaning about how useless he was, but with a smile, not a scowl.

And Aranea - hadn't she hugged him once? When he kept having those flashbacks - the strange dreams and throbbing headaches that made the scars on his forehead burn and itch. He'd told her about the dark wizard that had tried to kill him - about the prophecy he felt he had been born with, almost... It *had* been Aranea, hadn't it? He could barely remember the face, but when he closed his eyes sometimes, he could just about conjure up those ghostly arms, squeezing him tight.

A memory of a memory whispered, "It's going to be okay." A hand, squeezing his, in the darkness.

But you gave up the magic thing, didn't you? You let it go back then - back when you still had an inclination about what people wanted to hear, and what they didn't. Someone had spoken to you - hadn't they? Wizards, magic, and grand destiny... well that only elicits scornful laughter, doesn't it? So you scrunched that part of you down to the tiniest it could be, and pushed it away.

#just so OOWER the vwizarding scene

Of course, that longing to be touched - to be told "it's going to be okay" - that never goes away, does it? All those clumsy attempts at physical interactions. Reaching out for hands, or going in for hugs that were clearly unwanted.

*What was it Meenah said the other day? **Ampora you totally changed my mind about you, let's start makin out immediately...not.** Her general tone dripping with sarcasm tied up in a bow of disgust - but in that pause, that tiny, treacherous pause, part of you filled with light -*

A hand in the darkness, reaching out -

And then snatched back.

The cruel sting of that rejection made his lip twist, and his hands balled into fists.

“Shut up,” he said aloud, his voice echoing strangely in the room.

Shut up - shhh -shhhut - shut uppppppp -

He shivered again, and risked a tiny peek over his shoulder at the room.

It was just as it had always been, cluttered and messy, with the orange glow illuminating it all -

Wait. Did the shadow from the window always cover the sill like that? Had it got darker over the bed?

Of course not. Don't be stupid, he told himself sternly, before going back to his reading.

Next up were case studies on the theme of ostracisation of young children from groups of their peers. The conclusion detailed how children who were ostracised would never really be accepted by the group, and because they were not permitted to socialise, their social skills suffered enough so that even if they went to a new school, or a new group of friends, they could still stand out as the “weird kid”, and the cycle would continue. Ostracisation caused degraded social skills, which caused further ostracisation -

Doesn't this all feel painfully familiar? The little voice whispered, stronger now, Every spurned advance twisting in your guts, and releasing that bitter bile that fills you to the brim these days. -

Cronus shivered and yanked his leather jacket out of his sylladex, trying to ignore the voice as he pulled the comforting garment on.

What was it you said the other day?

I vwill say that it gets vvery frustrating after the first few epochs trying to make heads or tails vwhat people are evwen LOOKING for. I mean, in ANY quadrant.

So it's not for lack of trying, hmm? If you're anything, you're persistent.

(If you're anything)

Was it getting darker in here? Cronus scowled at the keyboard in front of him to see if he could turn the brightness up, but the controls were alien to him.

Let's see... Rufioh and Horuss have been together for longer than you can remember, so they're off the table.

Who cares? A mutant or a sweaty horse freak? I can do better than that.

Meulin's technically single - but she still spends far too much time with Kurloz, and you're scared of him aren't you? Admit it.

He is *legitimately* scary - everyone says so! And again - a chick who squeals every word or a creepy mime guy? I can do better than that!

Then there's Latula and Mituna. Latula just scurries - or skates - right past you, right? Or throws a "hi!" over her shoulder as she goes past, but never lets you start a conversation. I wonder why that is?

And Mituna -

We're friends. Sort of.

Really? That's funny.

WHY 4R3 Y0U 70UCH1N9 M3?

Cronus almost punched the desk in frustration - but managed to remember how much it'd hurt his knees just in time. Instead he settled for gnawing at his thumbnail. Why was he engaging with a voice inside his fucking head? Still, he refused to let it win -

I don't care! An airhead "gamer girl" whose whole MO is so try-too-hard - and for some ridiculous reason, she'd gone for Mituna fucking Captor. Who, frankly, is probably better as a friend-

(a friend?)

(1 FUCK1N9 H473 Y0U)

-than anything else. I can do better than -

Damara then.

She only speaks in East Beforean! And can usually be found smoking a blunt and flicking everyone her middle fingers! Hell, she's almost as much of a pariah as I am!

So you admit you're -

She's surly and closed off anyways. I can do better -

Porrim and Aranea - now they're some high-quality babes. But neither of them give you a second glance, do they? Of if they do, it's to badmouth you until you leave.

So? Both of them have been with basically everyone!

Not you -

And both of them are prone to lectures and droning on. “High-quality babes”?? Yeah right! I can do -

Meenah then. You’re both highbloods right? Not that you care about that stuff anymore of course. Surely she’d be happy to hang out with a fellow highblood -

Oh wait.

(Ew. ... #no).

Well who the fuck is she anyway? The empress of nothing! I don’t actually give a shit that she’s not interested. It doesn’t hurt me at all. Besides, I can -

I -

And then there’s Kankri.

Kankri with his vow. And obvious (and pathetic) red crush on Latula. Kankri who always has Porrim hanging around him like she was his fucking lusus.

Kankri who speaks to you. Kankri who defended you about the humankin stuff. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To learn more about these humans and their weird psychology nonsense that definitely doesn’t apply to you?

Cronus exited the document swiftly, trying to ignore the way his heart was pounding in his chest. It was stupid, really - of course, the reason he was getting worked up was because of the whole humankin thing. Yeah. Besides, he might not have the best relationships with the other Beforan trolls - but who cares?? They had proved themselves to be worthless. Beneath him. Same with the humans and the Alternian trolls. None of them deserved his friendship - or anything else for that matter...

Maybe he should just quit now – he could just *tell* Kankri he’d done the research – hell, the little guy was likely to say something like “I’m proud of you for making an active change blah blah blah,” - the usual Kankri babble. Cronus tended to zone out after a while, but he was banking on getting a few conversations out of it.

He went to stand, but something made him pause.

What was -? *Oh.*

It was suddenly much darker in here than it had been before, with the shadows leaving the entire bed and most of the floor in darkness... But that didn’t make sense, did it? The orange glow was still there outside, almost mocking him with it’s warmth in the cold little room, so why had the darkness advanced so much? It was almost as if -

The laptop let out a notification *ping*, and Cronus nearly jumped out of his skin.

Somehow, another folder had opened, and was pulsing gently on the screen, inviting him to click through.

He laughed nervously. This time the sound didn't echo. Instead, it seemed to get pulled into the vacuum of the darkness.

Right. Enough of that. Keep reading.

The next few articles were about how lonely people might act in a way that was seen as socially unacceptable - or couldn't quite understand unspoken social cues. Standing too close to someone or too far away, talking too loud or too soft, butting into conversations they weren't a part of, not making eye-contact - making *too much* eye contact.

A strange clicking sound made Cronus start, until he realised it was his own teeth chattering.

He snapped them closed and tried to keep his jaw rigid. For some reason he found himself wanting to draw as little attention to himself as possible.

Bit out of character for you, don't you think?

See, not that he was lonely or anythin', but it'd been fine straight after they'd all died. Which was an odd thing to say, granted, but there's nothing like a near-death – or, more accurately– a death experience to draw people together.

They'd laughed and cried in relief, checked out each other's spooky clouded eyes, and spoke animatedly about what was to come...

Didn't take long for things to revert though, did it? The status quo came rushing back in like the tide to the shore.

Not that he felt ostracised, but the cliques and friendships were already formed, and Cronus had found himself once again alone. To cap it off there was no Meenah. She'd gone, and no one knew when – or if - she'd be coming back.

Even when they finally encountered fresh blood – the strange “dancestor” trolls, and the aliens – the “humans”, he still couldn't seem to get anyone to talk with him, and his attempts to strike up a relationship – any type of relationship – had failed miserably.

he just flipped me off

she vwalked avway vwhile i vwas saying stuff

Of course, by now, you're bitter. All that highblood rage you've been suppressing – that rage you scrunched up into a tiny ball and done your best to shove away,

Of course, he was a nice guy, and nice guys don't flip out and go on a murder spree, no

matter how much the fury coursed through their veins –

But you can't get rid of it, can you? Not entirely. It's still there, just under the surface.

That deep, dark oceanic trench, calling him, pulling him in –

So it comes out in different ways. In righteous anger against your peers.

oh, nice. you always knew how to twist the fork.

In your acidic comments and defensiveness.

I'm not defensive.

No?

(Ostracisation leads to degraded social skills, which causes further ostracisation)

Fuck off.

It comes out out in petty cruelty.

1 D0N7 W4N7 Y0UR H4ND 7H3R3

He shuddered. Humans were whack. Maybe Kankri was wrong - Cronus wasn't like that at all.

This time the nervous laugh bubbled out of him before he could stop it, and it seemed as though the echo was back -

Heh heh heh hehhhh -

It had to be an echo. Just as it had to be a breeze in here. Because he refused to believe that what he'd heard just then was a low chuckle directly behind him. Just as the cool air that had hit the back of his neck *had to* just be a cold breeze -

Sure - if you want to believe the afterlife has a "breeze"?

Because the alternative was too awful to contemplate.

Cronus sat absolutely still while his heart thumped furiously in his chest.

Isn't it fun how that silly old thing's still going?

And tried to swallow, his dry mouth causing his throat to crackle which only made him freeze up further.

Without turning his head, he tried to see if he could see the door in his peripheral vision.

If I want to get out of this fucking bubble I'll have to move eventually.

Slowly does it...

He braced his hands on the desk, and began to push up with incremental slowness -

Something brushed his wrist.

Cronus was too startled to scream - instead he gasped sharply and then choked, coughing frantically until, his face purple and his eyes streaming, he managed to get his breathing in control just enough to look down at his wrist and saw -

Nothing.

There was nothing there.

Cronus bit the bullet and looked round. Nothing there either - just the messy room, it's contents shrouded in shadow. The orange glow still danced and flickered outside, letting in just enough light for Cronus to see the outline of the furniture, and the contents of the desk before him.

You're a highblood. Are you really going to let a little bit of darkness stop you from what you're doing? Pathetic....

He had to stop himself from looking under the desk like a grub, but the voice was right. This was *nothing*. He was just getting worked up because of all the stupid shit he'd been reading about what happened inside human brains. And hey - maybe he could embellish the story later, right? Tell Kankri he'd found this - this - dark presence or something. Say he'd been bravely - no - *nobly* searching through the dream bubbles. Keeping everyone safe. Fighting off monsters -

Yeah. Yeah that'd be good.

The laptop *pinged* again, and this time he barely even jumped. The cursor on the screen hovered over the next document.

What the hell, right? While you're here...

Hunching over the screen, Cronus started scanning the next few documents. They seemed to be about what lonely or isolated might do to get attention - hurt themselves, hurt others... One video clip was of a youth mental health advocate passionately preaching about how easy it was to take someone aside and ask if they were okay - or what was wrong.

"They're *attention seeking* because they *need attention*. It's a basic human instinct. Don't dismiss this - reach out to someone, you could very well save their life."

With a jolt, he realised that was exactly how it'd felt like when Kankri had jumped in the other

day?

Like being saved from sinking inexorably down to the bottom of that great yawning oceanic trench...

sounds like another desperate cry for attention imo

I feel I sh9uld jump in here -

It felt amazing, didn't it? Amazing...

and shameful.

Because Meenah was right, wasn't she? Meenah, who hasn't seen you in fuck knows how many sweeps.

to be honest, she might be right. sometimes i think i might only be saying im a human to get attention. maybe i should givwe it up.

Meenah who used to clutch his hand in the darkness –

look at you all frontin in that stupid getup

with your slicked hair and that dumb little wand in your mouth

What must you look like to her now..?

(just like that, shes out of my life again.)

Part of him suddenly felt like slamming the laptop shut and booting it across the room - but this was a dream bubble, so there was no telling...

Who might hear?

What might hear.

What that might cause. It might change the bubble to a whole new place, or attract other people to come see what was going on. The last thing he needed right now was a bunch of fucking gawkers coming by to see what he was doing.

"Loneliness and rejection hit the same area of the brain as physical pain," the mental health advocate continued, "And a lot of people - especially men, and older men at that - feel too ashamed to admit that they're lonely, or that there's a problem. For some, they end up experiencing this cognitive dissonance that occurs when they tell themselves - 'I'm not lonely, I like being on my own and having my own space'. Or 'It's not that I don't have friends, it's that everyone round here is so dull and inconsequential.' Some might even go as far as thinking, 'People don't deserve my company', or 'I'm too good for these people', and by thinking these things which soothe their egos, find themselves ever more isolated and

socially inept.

In the silence of the bubble, the darkness felt as though it was wrapping around Cronus like a cloak. He could feel it, but this time it wasn't the shock of his wrist being grabbed, it was... softer. Like a comfort blanket. He could feel it settling round his shoulders.

"Loneliness also has a detrimental affect on both mental and physical health – and the latter often surprises people." They continued, their voice suddenly sounding tinny and far-away in his hear-ducts, "As well as an increased risk of depression, dementia, cognitive decline and suicidal ideation, loneliness in older people is also linked to a higher risk of heart disease; stroke; high blood pressure; and disability. Loneliness increases the chance of mortality by 26%, making it as harmful for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day."

A humourless bark of laughter broke the silence and made Cronus jump, before he realised it had come from himself.

He was already fucking dead, so he'd avoid most of the physical effects.

Is that an admission?

According to this fucking chump he'd be at risk of depression and basically losing his mind though. Great! –

And you haven't already?

Forever and for-fucking-ever in this nightmare afterlife, with the same group of people to shun and ignore him until his brain basically melted to mush. Hooray.

The darkness tugged at him once more, a questing tendril wrapping around his ankle -

Thaaaaat's right. You're getting it now.

all these cats and kittens, im telling you. theyre alvways drawvn to the freaks and rejects. you havwe to be 8ROKEN in some vway to get a little concupiscent attention.

Isn't that what you said to Meenah? You're not broken enough?

See, I think you got it all wrong.

I think you're too broken.

"SHUT UP!" he screamed, the sound coming from the bottom of his stomach and tearing its way up his throat so the words came out hoarse and anguished.

He stood so fast he knocked the chair over, and spun round to grab it. There was that ugly *fucking* orange glow outside. Still flickering away, yet somehow the whole room was in darkness now.

Fucking dream bubbles, fucking humans, fucking *STUPID WRONG IDIOT VOICE* -

The pressure around his ankle tightened, and twisted up higher until it caught the back of his knee, making his leg buckle -

Tired. You're just tired.

He was tired. And his eyes were stinging -

Just the screen...

Yeah. He was fine, obviously. He'd just been staring at this *fucking* screen for too long. That was it. Maybe he should quit now - that was plenty of stuff about how human brains worked. Obviously it didn't apply to trolls, but humans could get really fucked up. Funny that. He tried to twist his mouth into a cruel smile, but that was worse, somehow.

He took a deep, shaky breath, and reached down blindly in the darkness for the chair. He sat heavily - his legs bent and buckled again the moment the chair was in place - and pulled out a cigarette.

'I just need to think for a second'

He blinked, and realised he must've spaced out a little; he'd chewed the limp cigarette down into a disgusting mush. He shuddered at the bitter taste and spat it out, suddenly grateful he was alone,

Better this way

and no one was around to see that.

He'd just decided it was time to shut the laptop down and go find someone to bother - to *speak to*, because of course, he was a delight. It'd make anyone of those idiots' day to talk to him.

Yeah.

Except when he reached out to shut off the *stupid fucking lying screen*, he saw another document, pulsing patiently under the cursor. This one was titled "examples - tv/ books/ other media". And he'd clicked on it before really thinking about it.

This appeared to be another very well organised list of... notes? There were strange titles with dates beside them and the marker "TV" or "Film" or "Book" beside each entry. Confused, Cronus scrolled down and stopped at a random entry:

Notes On a Scandal by Zoë Heller (2003) Book (Later, Film).

Huh. Okay. It seemed to be a quote from the book:

"Being alone is not the most awful thing in the world. You visit your museums and cultivate your interests and remind yourself how lucky you are not to be one of those spindly Sudanese children with flies beading their mouths. You make out To Do lists - reorganise the linen cupboard, learn two sonnets. You dole out little treats to yourself - slices of ice-cream cake, concerts at Wigmore Hall. And then, every once in a while, you wake up and gaze out of the window at another bloody daybreak, and think, I cannot do this anymore. I cannot pull myself together again and spend the next fifteen hours of wakefulness fending off the fact of

my own misery.”

Cronus took in a little sharp breath. Some tiny survival instinct was trying to get his attention, and point out that it felt as though something had just wrapped its way around his waist, tethering him to the chair, but he couldn't stop scrolling now - not when the words on the screen were busy pushing glass up under his fingernails and closing his throat up with unshed tears.

“People like Sheba think that they know what it's like to be lonely. They cast their minds back to the time they broke up with a boyfriend in 1975 and endured a whole month before meeting someone new. [...] But about the drip drip of long-haul, no-end-in-sight solitude, they know nothing. They don't know what it is to construct an entire weekend around a visit to the laundrette. Or to sit in a darkened flat on Halloween night, because you can't bear to expose your bleak evening to a crowd of jeering trick-or-treaters. Or to have the librarian smile pityingly and say, ‘Goodness, you're a quick reader!’ when you bring back seven books, read from cover to cover, a week after taking them out. They don't know what it is to be so chronically untouched that the accidental brush of a bus conductor's hand on your shoulder sends a jolt of longing straight to your groin. I have sat on park benches and trains and schoolroom chairs, feeling the great store of unused, objectless love sitting in my belly like a stone until I was sure I would cry out and fall, flailing, to the ground. About all of this, Sheba and her like have no clue.”

Is it ringing a bell yet?

so i take it even after a billion sweeps here with a boat load of eligible spook shorties to mack on

Cronus swallowed painfully and tried to find some tiny spark of hope in the darkness... but when was the last time someone had even looked at him without a sneer of disgust?

you still never got any action

A few sweeps backs Kankri had accidentally brushed his arm while going off on some needlessly complicated rant - and the electric touch of that brief connection had drove him mad for weeks after.

Y0UR3 571LL 70UCH1N9 M3 4ND 1 D0N7 UND3R574ND WHY 7H15 15 H4PP3PP1N9 -

Cronus realised he was shaking, his fists balled so tight his nails were cutting into his palms. Stupid *fucking* humans and the *stupid* fucking ways their minds worked.

youre right. my feelings really are real. not fake, like the huge disappointing fraud that magic turned out to be.

No. Fuck no. It was time to give up this fucking humankind nonsense because it clearly wasn't working and he was *nothing*. *Like*. *Them*.

He gasped, in sudden pain, as though a tendril of darkness had punched through his chest and was now *twisting* -

Shhhh it's nothing...

Loneliness and rejection hit the same area of the brain as physical pain, remember?

He scrolled up furiously, and was about to close the document, when the first entry caught his eye:

A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness (2011) Book (Later, Film)

This one had an asterisk next to it, and the note: "Also relevant to documents: Grief, Broken Families (H - Drive)"

That vice-like pressure was back around his throat, but it wasn't like he was trying to hold back the tears anymore...

Shhhhhh, just read on...

Okay he'd just read this one. *Just* this one. Then he'd close the document. Because it was a *dumb stupid document*, and he'd probably laugh at how pathetic these humans were. Yeah. That was it.

He squinted at the screen as his breath came in short little gasps. Was it darker in here somehow? Was the screen dimming?

Clutching one hand to his chest to try and stifle the pain, as though to protect his heart from being torn out, he read on:

"There was once an invisible man, the monster continued, though Conor kept his eyes firmly on Harry, who had grown tired of being unseen. [...]"

It was not that he was **actually** invisible, the monster said, following Conor, the room volume dropping as they passed. It was that the people had become used to not seeing him. [...] And if no one sees you, the monster said, picking up its pace, too, are you really there at all? [...]"

No, the screen couldn't be dimming because there was that little battery marker in the lower right hand corner. Full to the brim.

Are you really there at all?

Finally, his fins, which had been valiantly trembling to catch his attention, finally got it, as they were folded and crushed into the side of his head as the darkness closed in.

“And then one day the invisible man decided, the monster said, its voice ringing in Conor's ears, I will **make** them see me. "How?" Conor asked, [...] How did the man do it?"
[...]"

He was alone, out in the darkness of the Furthest Ring. The perfect place for a trap -

“He called, it said for a **monster**.”

Cronus got out one strangled little cry before the tendrils - *tentacles* - enveloped him completely. He tried to fight the darkness, tried to suck in a breath -

If you're thinking you're safe because you're dead little Bard... well allow me to disabuse you of that quaint hope.

I'm gunna die. *Double*-die. And no one will ever know or even care. No hand reaching out to save me -

Is that self-pity I hear? What makes you think you're entitled to even a shred of pity?

what the fuck else i done to you??

you ignored me.

Like a petulant little grub. "You ignored me".

“But I'm in pain. It's more than that.” He knew he wasn't speaking aloud, but he felt he had to push back - fight it somehow. “That thing the human writer said. ‘The drip drip of long-haul, no-end-in-sight solitude’. I -”

Oh I know, don't worry.

It's sweep after sweep of wandering in lonely circles through the same dream bubbles you've seen a billion times. Of creeping on the edge of conversations you knew you'd never be asked to join. Of trying to corner people that were too weak, or too nice to tell you to fuck off. Of making up stupid stuff like the humankind nonsense - and even managing to fool yourself about it, because it meant someone would pay attention to you for more than five fucking seconds -

“Feeling the great store of unused, objectless love sitting in my belly like a stone until I was sure I would cry out and fall, flailing, to the ground,” He recited, clutching desperately at his flimsy defense as though it might save him.

It's stalking Mituna so you could get him alone. It's exerting a petty, twisted power over someone, just because you can - because, in fact, it's the only thing you can do.

WHY W0N7 7H3 W31RD 70UCH1NG 570P -

The part of him still conscious shuddered. What could he even say to that? How do you

defend so reprehensible an action?

“...Because I can do it. And you can’t stop me” He replied to the darkness, the truth opening the floodgates for the darkness to fill him up, weighing him down like stones in his pocket, and tugging him down to the bottom of the ocean, “Because this is the only fucking way I ever feel like a person anymore -”

vwe alvways had a good thing together, didnt vwe?

“Only way I feel like I exist -”

1 W4N7 7H47 Y0UR H4ND 70 N07 83 ON MY 80DY PL3453

If you drown out the protests (if you squint) you can almost see it as friendship.

Y0UR MU51C 15 5H17 4ND 1 FUCK1N9 H473 Y0U

The lies we tell ourselves are often the best of all.

1M 50RRY

When did he become so bitter and twisted? He mused, as he settled into the sediment, and felt the first particles of himself begin to wash away.

yo that was some scuzzy repartee there even for you crodog

When did he become the worst fucking character in the shitty melodrama of their (after) lives?

(a monster)

He deserved this. He deserved worse. At least this was gentle....

Lost at the deepest part of the ocean, with that emptiness inside him finally filling up.

The hollowness, the grief and disgust at himself -

If there was nothing but pitch-black darkness, maybe he wouldn't have to feel the gnawing hunger anymore...

He could just Be gone.

Good riddance to bad rubbish. That's right. Shhhhh. Don't fight it.

“But there are harder things than being invisible,” a soft voice said, reading the rest of the quote, “Conor was no longer invisible. They all saw him now. But he was further away than ever.”

Mmm...

...

....

Wait -!

That voice - speaking aloud in the void somehow -

Cronus tensed, pulling himself back together. Was that an orange glow he could see?

With herculean effort, he wrenched himself up, clawing at the tendrils around his throat and face.

It was! That soft flickering orange glow - no longer eerie. Now it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen -

Sat exactly where he'd been at the desk, Cronus' eyes flew open.

He let out a raw cry of triumph, and felt the monster - the *thing* - skittering away to hide from the light.

"It's a beautiful book."

Cronus nearly fell out of the chair as the soft voice spoke again from behind him.

He staggered to his feet, and turned to see the human - Rose - her arms crossed across her chest, while her face remained gentle and reserved.

"If you'd like to borrow it some time, you might find it... helpful."

"I was just - just- " Cronus didn't have an explanation.

What could he say? That he'd overheard the human with the light hair and orange robes was "Rose", and knew a lot about "psychology" - which was basically how human brains worked?

That he'd mooched around the dream bubbles, sometimes following her, sometimes just stumbling on blindly, until he reached the room he was certain was hers.

That he'd had the fucking audacity to search through the laptop of the *Seer of Light*, the loremaster of the horrorterrors, and the matesprit of the other rainbow-drinker Maryam - because he'd wanted a reason to have another conversation with Kankri?

"You don't need to explain yourself to me," Rose said, her voice quiet - but firm, "I know how it feels to be an outsider looking in - *oh*, and that reminds me; I also have the audio recording for this musical -"

“Shut up,” Cronus snarled, his fins flaring in agitation, the highblood anger once more clawing its way up his throat even as tears continued to drip off the tip of his nose. Rose simply raised an eyebrow.

“And there you go - lashing out because you don’t want to admit there’s a problem. Textbook.”

“I don’t have a problem,” he yelled back, slamming the laptop down on the bed and turning to stalk out of the bubble.

He’d been through *enough* - and he didn’t have to fucking explain himself to *anyone* -

“Sure you don’t,” came Rose’s reply, “but if you ever wanted to talk about the problem you don’t have, I’m about.”

Cronus paused.

But... she didn’t mean that. Did she?

He held his breath, and turned back.

A hand reaching out in the darkness –

No, he thought, looking back at Rose, her calm, serious face shining gently in the orange glow that illuminated her room.

From the light.











by Flipsidered

Pawprints

Sometimes you wonder if the stars are lonely.

Almost everyone you knew had some kind of romantic notion of the stars, what they stood for, what they were—troll song and troll tall tale and even troll mythology offered a thousand and one explanations, but none of them, none of them, suited you and what you saw, what you *felt*, when you looked up at the stars.

Vast, incomprehensible, loneliness.

Each single star was like a pawprint left behind long after the whole of the trail had faded away, washed out by rain or wind or other weather. Each time you saw the stars, that lonely feeling settled back into your bones. Your friends could make all the jokes they liked about your matchmaking tendencies. To you, each match was like another sandcastle built to stand up against an endlessly engulfing tide.

Someday, you'd have built enough.

Bright city lights called your name even if the blinding light of day hurt your eyes. Your *lulus* had handled the transition admirably well, becoming a pampered hive-purrbeast in almost the blink of an eye. You had handled the transition even better—it was something you'd always dreamed about.

Here, it was almost always lively, almost always loud and beaming, winsome and bright.

Here, you couldn't see the stars.

Here was *perfect*.

When the meteors first began to rain down, you didn't quite understand. Some trolls described silence as deafening, a much-lauded term of phrase, but it was the shifting colors and commotion, the "noise" you felt in your bones with every rumble of a toppled building that had woken you up, and once you were awake, there were a million messages on Trollian to handle. At first, the meteors seemed like falling stars, and you wondered for a moment, foolishly, if this was what happened when they finally gave in to their loneliness.

You wondered, for a moment, if you would someday do the same.

And then the world caught up to your wonderings, and there was no more time to be curious when

there was a game to play, a world to explore, and so so so many things to see and do and change and be and create and—

—and your appreciation for silence is as profound and deep as the silence itself, even if you can no longer look at the stars at all. The silence makes them seem all the more lonely, all the more longing, all the more like those pawprints left behind long after everything else has faded away. You have to build things up, shore up those sandcastles, *keep* the tide from winning, keep everything from falling apart.

But it's harder now, with only twelve of you. Only so many sandcastles to build, only so many walls to keep that hungry sea at bay.

It's so much harder.

There's so much more to be lonely for.

The music listening device is loaded with all of your favorite songs, turned to max volume, and placed squarely on the center of your chest. You've found that you can feel the music this way, in ways that build more sandcastles than you can with your own two hands, and you've been wanting to try something.

So you'd come out here, to one of the highest hills in your land, and set up, just as the sun was about to set. Blanket on the hillside. Meulin on the blanket. Music listening device on the Meulin.

Then you'd closed your eyes.

And waited.

When you opened them again, night had fallen all around you. Opening your eyes was meant to be a moment of excitement, of joy, the climax of minutes, moments, of feeling the cooling dark roll up your skin, the non-deadly light slowly setting, of your heartbeat picking up as the sky above you grew dim—

—but there were no stars. You had waited, and wanted, and hoped—for once, for *once*, you had wanted the stars.

And they had deserted you.

You were wrong, before, you realized, about the stars being the pinnacle of loneliness.

This is incredibly worse.

The dream bubbles are a blessing and a haven. You only have your own two hands, of course, but there are others of you, and your own two hands are multiplied, spread across the space in forms you could barely count. It's perfect. It feels like you finally have a chance.

Besides, there's so much more to learn and do. Aranea jokes about you being an ardent disciple of the romantic sciences, and you let her. She wouldn't understand your sandcastles, or the loneliness of the stars. She's too busy keeping her own self company, with machinations and plans that you don't really care to understand.

You're far too busy for that anyway.

It worries you less, now, when ships are broken. Timelines, doomed as they might be, offer hope: in this one, Kankri never made his vows. In that one, Porrim filled all of her quads. In the next one, in the next one, in the next one. There are thousands of options, and thousands of iterations, and *thousands* of variants of all the trolls you knew. Now, there are always more ships to be made, more castles to build.

You do not even try to turn to the stars, although you know there are several memories of them, well preserved between the pages of the dream bubbles themselves.

There was so much to do, after all! So many people to meet, even before the descendants of your Alternian selves began to appear, carrying with them their own stories, their own quads, their own ships —your match was a purrfectly sw33t girl with some good ideas on ships of her own, and the inside scoop on who everyone was into.

No time to be lonely. No time to be lonely at all.

You are standing alone under a sky full of stars, the first you've dared to enter, the one you do not dare to look up at and see, as you recall a story you once read. "And in the end, when they had saved the world, and put it all to rights, the magical world sent them back home. It was meant to be a blessing, but to the newly made children, who had grown into adults, adults in their own names and rights and powers, it was little more than a curse."

You are standing alone under a sky full of stars, and someone is about to win SGRUB, or SBURB, or whatever name it has taken on tonight. You are about to become that child sent home, or the trapped memory of a dying world, or something that does not exist anymore at all.

You are not sure which option you prefer. You are not sure which option will hurt more.

When they win the game, you can feel it, and you aren't sure how to put it to words. Some stories about endings had talked about dissolution, dissolving into nothingness. Others preferred the aesthetic imagery of fading away, while some, the more modern ones, liked the idea of breaking up into pieces as everything shattered apart.

It's nothing like that. It's nothing you could ever explain.

And you look up at the sky full of stars as they welcome you home.









The phrase "*Basic sparring only!*" has become the bane of your entire existence.

Whatever your Ancestor has in mind for the right things that make up a queen, everything that *you* are good at does not seem to be on the list—it's aggravating, it's infuriating, it's absolutely *insufferable*.

Or it would be, if you didn't have friends.

Your *friends* don't insist on basic sparring only when you train together, your *friends* know that you can handle S)(OAL MUC)(MORAY!!!!!!

Your saccharine sweet Ancestor, with all that *pity* in her pusher for trolls that don't deserve it, doesn't get it.

"We'll have plenty of time to train together, beloved descendant," she tells you, soft smile and soft hands that belie the strength she holds. You *know* what she can do. You've seen her fight before, spar with the other seadwellers around the palace, with your friends' Ancestors, with *psionics*—

She is all that is beauty and grace and glory.

And she won't teach you.

You've tried to be good. You've tried to remind yourself that in all your short (very short, infinitesimally so, compared to the sweeps ahead) life, you have learned much, and you will have time. But you are not your Ancestor, and the thought of wasting your long, *long* life on the kind of patience she has seems to be a special kind of *pointless* and a certain kind of *hell*.

What's the *point* if it's not full? If you're not living your whole life with every minute booked up to its brim? Why even *bother*?

Be patient, your Ancestor tells you, the moon whispers, the world says. *Be patient*.

You think that might be your second most hated phrase.

Your colder friends' Ancestors aren't like that—at least, not on the sparring courts. *They* know how to *really* be highbloods, even if they're all *proper*, going on about *responsibility* and *caring* the second they're off the courts. You've heard some of them talking about how it makes *sense* to work out the natural highblood aggression on each other, on the courts, somewhere *far* away from all of those precious little lowbloods who need so much attention and care.

You have aggression to work out. *You* know how to really be a highblood.

But your *Ancestor* seems to think that you shouldn't even *have* any aggression to work out. She doesn't know you at all!

Really, though. If it wasn't for your friends, you'd be absolutely *insane* by now.

You start the week off with Aranea, usually, and whatever sap she's recruited for the exercises she's come up with. When she first agreed to help you, she'd insisted on doing it her way. After all, she had her own way of fighting, and she felt like it wouldn't do you *much* harm to learn it.

At first, you'd balked.

Now, you're eager for these sessions.

She does her research, Aranea Serket does, looking up old forms and new forms from demonstration books and historical treatises that Cronus' Ancestor shoves on him. Every time you meet, she's come up

with some move for you to try, some new style of fighting for you to explore.

In return, you don't comment on the glassy look some of her "assistants" wear, the bright eagerness in her eyes as you attack. She's gotta get her practice in too, coddamn.

Sometimes you want to comment on other things, though. The way it seems to *annoy* her when you innovate, when you go outside her lesson plans. It's annoying to you, too! You have shit you wanna try, and you ain't gonna slow down for anymoby.

But she's helping you, and scrodclam, she's closer to your Ancestor than you are, you think. She plays at sweet just the way your Ancestor likes, seems patient, and acts so *caring*. It'd make you sick if you didn't *know* there was more to her than that. Betides, she's *useful*, and when you finally take this joint over, you've got plans for everything and she's part of them.

You try not to think about what her plans might be for you.

There's always a seadweller or two willing to spar. Sometimes you even get those blues, full of themselves and their strength, trying you out for a challenge. Putting them back into their places is as easy as it is fun, and according to the changing block gossip, they don't bet on who can beat you anymore—it's all about how long someone can stay conscious. Brings a certain kind of satisfaction to your soul.

You like playing against the purples best. Seadwellers can offer the best fights, shore, but most of them are so steeped in that *responsibility* fuckship that it takes you a *while* to break 'em out of their own heads. The purples know what's up, they know where it's at, coming in with clubs and clown grins and chucklevoodooos all at once—that's the kinda shit you know how to work with. Makes you wonder exactly it'd be like to take their power to the next logical level.

But you don't. You won't. Not til it's your show.

Midweeks are for Cro. He's a bottomfeeder, to be shore, but he gets you in a way you don't reely like except when you're on the sparring courts. You can see it in him—he has just as much ship to be working out as you, and shell, who are you to deny him another sharpened edge to throw himself against? He's a match for you, most of the time, but only because his Ancestor *actually* trains him. If yours gave you half the training his did, you'd wipe the floor with his smarmy glutes on the weekly. As it is, you keep him in line and keep up with him, and keep his training sessions to the midweek, when you've had time enough to recover from Aranea, to give you time enough to recover from him. The two of them push you the hardest, and you're sure, you're *shore*, that if the world were different—if the world were *yours*—you could take all of your dumbass friends so much farther.

Even the ones who don't seem to get why it would be good for them.

Then one night, one *awful* night, your Ancestor catches you at it.

Here's the thing: It wasn't a secret. You didn't mean it to be. You didn't even *think* this was something she could catch you at, because you didn't *think* it was something *to* be caught at.

But the way she acts, the way the *court* acts, you know it was, and she did, and it's *so fucking awful*.

She doesn't yell. Not at you, never at you, no matter how much you wish she would. She just acts *so fucking disappointed*.

And it's still awful.

You're always the one who's gotta yell.

"Of COURSE I had to go to my fronds for training—YOU wouldn't train me!"

"I *have* been training you, Meenah, although it seems to me that you have not been so aware of that—"

"Or moby you ain't doing it right!"

Your last screams goes through her heart like a 2x3dent, and you see the pain in those ageless eyes. Shit.
How the shell she made it so long as Empress when she's got so many EELINGS is beyond you.

You turn on a heel and *sprint* outta there, and you don't stop running til you reach the moon.

When you play the game, it proves you right, it proves her wrong. You hold onto that. You keep holding onto that.

by Thescyfychannel 00-3





by Voiidpriince



by Lightingupthereef



by Lizardlicks

The sun rose slowly over the horizon at five thirty-two in the morning, painting the cream walls of a small apartment bedroom a warm peachy color.

With the sun's rays came a lazy, sluggish sort of heat, a humidity and warmth that thickened the air and stopped the wind. The heat rolled across the pavement outside the apartment and onto the grass, carried by the sun's rising light that turned the sky a soft orange, then pink, then finally a vibrant blue. The open curtains shifted with the meager wind that managed to fight its way through the muggy morning heat, whispering as the soft material rubbed against itself, almost silent.

Certainly inaudible to the two trolls that occupied the room.

The king-size bed shoved into a corner held them both, curled up around one another, clutching tightly. Legs tangled together, hands gripped at baggy, rolled-up pajama shirts. Grey skin flushed yellow and teal with the warmth of the sun and the soft breaths that spread across neck and cheek alike. One twitched, mumbling something tiredly, and the other drew closer as if to silence them.

That silence would stay until precisely five forty-five.

The tinkling chime of a phone alarm began at exactly the minute mark. A thunderous vibration rattled across the nightstand that silenced the birds outside and sent them all aflutter to escape the horrid drone. *Wake up!* The screen of the phone read.

A groan rose from one of the pair. The sound of shifting blankets signalled untangling limbs, jerky movements from the tired bodies that as of yet were unaccustomed to wakefulness. Four horns poked themselves from under the blankets, attached to one impressively tousled head of hair. Its owner reached up a spider-like hand, nails painted red and bitten to the quick, and ran it across his scalp as if this would somehow tame the tangles that sleep had gifted him. Instead, all it did was get his hand caught.

"Son of a bitch!"

His voice was louder even than the still-ringing alarm, sharp and lisping. At its sound a sleepy mumble rose from the pair of pointed cone horns buried under the blankets beside him. The other troll of the inseparable pair roused, sitting up and getting a good look at her surroundings. Seeing her mate in his predicament she smiled tiredly, carefully pulled the tangled hand from its trap. Unlike him, her nails remained unpainted and neatly trimmed, as well taken care of as the rest of her.

"Shhhh. You'll scare the birds." Latula murmured in a sleep-husky voice. A low grunt left her as she stretched, arching her back and shivering in satisfaction as it pops back into place. The tinkling chime of the phone began to annoy her and she reached over to shut it off.

Mituna, the tousle-haired yellowblood, buries his face into her shoulder, still clearly too groggy to even consider leaving the bed. She chuckles softly and wraps her arms around his waist, leaning as much into him as he is into her. If either one of them were to move away from their position now, the other would surely fall.

"I'll scare your birds in a minute." He replies, muffled against her skin.

She laughs and ruffles his hair, careful of the tangles. "Sure you will. Come on, it's time to get up."

"Hell no."

Latula frowned and carefully shifted to give Mituna her best disappointed face. Knowing exactly what was coming, he turned his scarred eyes down and away, refusing to meet her gaze. After all, the look wasn't there if he couldn't see it, right?

"Mituna." She said sternly. Even he can't ignore the sound of her voice. He groans, nuzzling himself into her chest, pushing her back onto the bed and wrapping his arms around her. He squeezes tightly and refuses to let go, whining. "Mituna, oof - come on. It's not that bad. It's not like I'm asking you to run a marathon."

"I wanna run a marathon." He grumbled, hiding against her collarbone. "No waking up. Just sleep. It's too early."

Latula sighed. They went through this every morning, she wasn't sure why she was surprised. Giving in, she curled up around him and pulled him close, hitting the snooze button on the next alarm. Mituna heard the distinct *ping* and smiled, kissing her collar sweetly. She huffed at him and gave one of his horns a gentle flick.

"It's only an hour. Don't get excited." She murmured.

Nonetheless, Latula pressed a soft kiss to his forehead and closed her eyes. Silence fell over the small bedroom yet again and the birds, sensing the relative peace, began their chorus anew. Despite herself, Latula felt her eyes beginning to drift shut. The sound of soft snoring from her mate was her farewell back into sleep.

-

Latula is a tiny thing, barely four feet tall at four sweeps, with a bandaid on her chin.

Her lusus tells her, "Don't play around at the skatepark. Watch where you're going. Don't forget to wear a helmet when you ride your two wheeled device." The massive white dragon she calls a parent lovingly pats her helmeted head with a clawed wing, setting her off outside with a cheerful squawk and a puff of smoke from her nostrils. With pursed lips, Latula grabs the handlebars and rides off down the street.

It's warm; the vernal equinox is long past, sliding lazily into the late solstice seasons when even the nights are unbearably hot. Latula feels grateful for the breeze that brushes past her face as she rides, flicking her ponytail almost playfully, whistling past her ears. The pink moon overhead shines brightly against the backdrop of stars, casting a warm glow over the street and causing long shadows to creep their way out from under Latula and her bike. With no one else out, she almost feels alone in the world, and she can't tell if that's a good feeling or not.

Once at the skate park Latula never wants to ride her two wheeled device. Instead it's ditched near the entrance, hidden in the bushes from thieves and rowdy older trolls who would seek to bother her. She keeps her helmet on - not out of any concern for safety, but purely because something much more important makes her forget to take it off in

her excitement. Something that made her come back every day, drop her device like an embarrassing eyesore, and hide near the jungle gym.

Not something - someone.

It's a yellowblood, a lanky thing with four horns and bright two-toned eyes. His clothes are a horrid clash of primary colours, shorts and a T-shirt dirty with dust from the half-pipes he's been riding all day. He and his other friends - mostly lowbloods as well - ride the pipes with a grace and ease that say they've been doing this for a long while. When he rides the upturn Latula can see his sneakers are mismatched, the same colours as his eyes, with bright yellow strings.

However, despite their loud palette, his clothes aren't what lead Latula to stare at him from afar each day. It's the utter joy on his face, the uneven fangs sticking out of his mouth when he smiles so gleeful and triumphant. It's his voice, whooping and hollering with every downward leap into the pipe like a stereotypical lowblooded hooligan, eyes tearing up yellow with the wind that whips his hair into a frenzied mess. It's the bloodied knees and hands, no padding, all concern for safety gone out the window. It's the way he moves with the board in utter synchrony, leaning into it like he was made to ride it. There's a grace to the yellowblood's movements that reminds Latula of water, the way it laps at sand and crashes to the shore in great and terrifying waves.

The yellowblood glances her way and there's a wild smile on his face. Latula gasps, ears turning a light teal, and hides herself away.

Maybe some night she'll introduce herself, but tonight is not that night.

-

Sunrises on Earth, Latula's come to learn, are nowhere near as harsh as the ones on Beforus had been.

The sounds and warmth of the morning roused her not fifteen minutes later as, with the rising of the sun, the world began to come to life. The sound of clinking wooden chimes hung in the window and birds chirping in the nearby oak tree sang the morning's usual song. Cars outside added their dull rumble and a lawnmower directly underneath them hummed a low bass note to the sweet tune. It made Latula's ears twitch and a comfortable sort of peace weigh on her body as if to say *stay in bed today. There's no rush. Just enjoy the morning.*

The smell of coffee and bacon, however, pulled her from the warmth of her bed.

Mituna was nowhere to be found, the bedsheets beside her rumpled but empty. Her brows furrowed, lips pursing. Mituna always overslept, that was basically a given at this point. Even before his accident he'd overslept. For him to be up before Latula - and making what smelled like a delicious breakfast - was almost unheard of.

With a yawn and a stretch Latula sat up, pushing her tangled hair out of her face. It needed a cut soon, she noted as her brain began to slowly chug to life. Slowly, she pushed herself out of her bed and wiggled her feet into her teal slippers. Mornings had never agreed with either one of them, but Latula was always the morning grump. That

was just how it went. How Mituna managed to bounce out of the bed in the morning like a literal ball of sunshine was constantly beyond her imagining.

Glancing at the clock, Latula let out a low groan. *She* had been the one to oversleep this time.

"Tuney," She called, shuffling zombielike from the bedroom and forcing back another yawn, hiding it behind her hand. "Tune, are you making breakfast? How long have you been u--oh."

There, in the kitchen, stood Mituna. Fluffy-haired, grinning wildly, flipping pancakes. Wearing nothing but a very cliched apron that read *Kiss the Cook*. He spotted Latula leaning against the kitchen doorway and his two-tone eyes sparkled like jewels. If it was even possible, his mouth seemed to stretch into an even bigger smile.

"Hey, Tulip, check it out!" He said, his normally lisping voice slurred even further by the early morning's tiredness and a lack of caffeine. "I did it! I've been practising for *ever* and I finally got it! I flipped the pancake!"

He looked so proud of himself. Latula couldn't even bring herself to be angry about the splatters of pancake batter that covered the kitchen counters, or the fact that he was buck-ass naked in front of the stove. She shook her head and grinned, folding her arms.

"You flipped the pancake," She said, reaching over and trying to get a glop of batter from Mituna's flyaway hair. It wasn't working all that well. "Not a bad job, Tuney. Did you put chocolate chips in them?"

"Damn straight." He pointed to the little brown dots that littered the breakfast treat sizzling away in the pan. "It's not good without chocolate chips. Tastes like dirt and flour." He wrinkled his nose, sticking out his tongue and Latula laughed.

"Yeah, that's fair. We're gonna need a shower after breakfast, though. You're covered in batter - and where are your boxers? I swear you went to bed with a pair on."

Mituna shook the pancake in the pan, avoiding Latula's eyes. She folded her arms, one hip cocked to the side as she watched him get more and more uneasy. He squirmed under her gaze and she knew that he wouldn't be long breaking. Then--

"*Fiiiiine*," He admitted finally. "They're too tight. I left 'em in the respitblock. Clothes are dumb anyway." With a dramatic flair he pointed the spatula at Latula, a cocky grin on his face and mischief in his eyes. "You should take yours off too. Come on! Strip! Strip or no pancakes."

Latula snorted. "Ha! You wish. I'll save the stripping for the bath." She said, taking the spatula from him daintily and turning over the pancake before it burnt to the dry bottom of the pan. She added more butter and the teflon sizzled, smoke rising in the air as the butter melted and turned a bitter brown. Mituna hissed and covered his ears, moving back away from the pan with a disgruntled expression.

"Sorry for the noise, babe." Latula waved the buttery spatula towards the table. "Get us some plates, Tuney? I'll finish up here."

"But I wanted to make breakfast for you!" Mituna's protest came out a little more whiny than he would have liked to admit, but it still melted Latula's heart anyway. His lips pursed in a sulky expression and the kicked-barkbeast look he wore was enough to make even Latula back down. With a soft expression she sighed, turning down the stove to a respectable temperature and pouring the batter for another pancake. When she was done, she handed Mituna back the spatula and kissed him sweetly. He smiled into the kiss, knowing he'd won.

It wasn't as if Latula ever won against his puppy look, anyway.

-

Latula heard the hit before she saw it.

The sound of fists meeting flesh was not one she was accustomed to, but it was nonetheless unmistakable. She would have thought nothing of it, continuing on her nightly bike ride to the park, but then she heard something else that made her already cool blood freeze in her veins. Cries of pain in an all too familiar voice; a voice that Latula normally heard whooping and cheering as its owner dove headfirst down ramps and came up the other side, sailing through the air.

A kind of anger flooded Latula's pan and her tires skidded on the dirt trail that led to the park as she whirled around. Her legs throbbed, pedaling as hard as she could to race back towards the source of the sound.

Her suspicions were confirmed. There, lying just off the path, a cluster of higher-blooded trolls gathered in a circle around a familiar yellow-jacketed target. He had his hands over his head, bandaged knees tucked in towards the core of his body to try and avoid getting any more kicks to the stomach. It didn't work; someone got him from behind and he cried out again, shouting curses and spitting vehemently at the group. It only caused them to jeer louder, encouraging their antics.

Latula, a tiny, scrappy little tealblood, had no chance against the three blues and a violet that threatened the object of her hidden obsession. But that wasn't about to stop her; she sped forward with an angry holler on her lips, her front tire aimed directly for the ringleader of the group.

Two or three of them looked up and their eyes widened. Like a synchronized ballet they all dove out of the way, yelling in fear of the crazy little wriggler speeding towards them at a breakneck pace. If she didn't hurt them, she was certain to hurt herself with how insane she was acting. But she didn't care; the bluebloods scattered and Latula stumbled off her bike, lunging at the violet with teeth bared and an angry scream on her lips.

It worked. The violet looked about to piss himself as he raced back, tripping over a rock behind him and scrambling on all fours like a pinchbeast to get away from her. She smiled, all victorious fangs and scraped-up hands and knees. Her body hurt from the fall she'd taken but her heart was racing and she felt proud to have done something good. Slowly she got to her feet, panting and feeling adrenaline course through her body

"Are you okay?" She asked the yellowblood, who still sat dumbfounded on the ground. He stared up at her and Latula took a moment to simply admire his two-toned eyes. Red and blue, she decided, were her two favorite colours. Even though she was still breathing heavily she leaned down, reaching out a hand to help him up.

He hesitated. Latula was frightened for a moment that he would call her out, get angry for acting like a culler. Her blood colour suddenly became very prominent in her mind and anxiety bells rang. Was this something a culler would do? Was this even okay? Did he think that she was just doing this to coddle him?

Then he smiled wide. He laughed, reaching up and taking her hand, pushing himself up off the ground.

"That was awesome!" He cheered. "Did you see them running? Man, you were like an angry hornbeast! I've never seen anything like that before!" The energy that he exuded as he fist-pumped the air made it look as if he hadn't been injured at all, despite the newly forming bruises she'd seen as his jacket pulled away from his stomach. He didn't even seem to care. "Damn, Teal! That was the best thing I've seen all week."

Latula's cheeks went a bright blue and she smiled sheepishly. Well, at least he wasn't angry. To have the object of her affections cheering her on for a momentary lapse of judgement, though, that was...something else.

"Thanks," She said, rather shyly. "I, uh....I hope I didn't hurt you with my bike or anything."

"Nah." The yellowblood waved her off. "Nothing I haven't done to myself before. I'm Mituna, by the way."

His smile was adorably gap-toothed as he held out a hand to shake. He must have chipped a fang recently. Latula thought it was one of the most adorable things she'd ever seen. Her ears perked up, turning teal as she reached out a shaking hand and clasping his in her own. "Latula."

"Latula, huh?" His smile didn't even fade for a second. "Sounds like a flower. Do you skate any?"

Latula shook her head no. Mituna laughed.

"What are you doing near a skate park if you can't skate? Do you do any rad tricks on your bike?"

Another shake of her head. "I just like to watch."

Mituna's smile became a little gentler then. He let go of her hand, picking up his board and her bike, handing the latter back to her. "Well, let's go change that." He said, walking towards the park. Latula's eyes widened. Without a second thought she trotted along right behind him.

--

"Don't forget your pills!"

Mituna's voice echoed down the hall from Latula as she finished clearing away the dishes. The pancakes had been slightly burnt, but a little bit of syrup had fixed them right up. Sometimes she forgot just how good of a cook Mituna had been before his accident. He was getting there again, too. She reminded herself to praise him a little more on it. After all, Mituna loved praise on anything, and she loved seeing the way his face lit up when he'd done something right.

He was doing a lot more things right lately. Latula was amazed at just how much a new world and a new life had begun to heal him in so little time. Then again, stagnance was never good for anything except bringing out the worst in people. Even bright, sunshiney people like Mituna fell victim.

"Can do, toots. Go on up, I'll be there in a minute. I just wanna scrub this pan before anything gets caked." Latula called back to him.

"Hurry up! Just let it soak!" Mituna sounded impatient and she sighed, shaking her head and putting the pan back in the hot water.

"Fine, fine." She said. Her arm was aching anyway from trying ineffectually to get the sticky bits of chocolate off the pan. It could soak for a little while, she supposed. Not everything had to be done right away. Rolling her shoulder, she reached into the cabinet on top of the fridge and pulled out a small orange bottle. Her nose wrinkled as she dumped one pill out into her palm and tossed it into her mouth. It went down rather stickily since she'd dry-swallowed, but at least it went down this time. She put the pills back, seeing another bottle and hesitating.

"Did you take your pills?" Latula called up to Mituna.

"What?"

"I said," She yelled a little louder. "*Did you take your pills?*"

"Yes!"

"Okay." She closed the cupboard door and headed up the stairs. Clothes were strewn throughout the hallway as if Mituna had stripped on his way up the stairs and into the bathroom. He sat in the already full tub with a big grin hidden under the bubbles. His ears wiggled and Latula huffed, hands on her hips.

"I don't trust that look on your face." She said, tugging off her shirt.

"What look?" Mituna asked innocently. "I don't have a look on my face, unless you count my normal gorgeousness."

Latula snorted. She wasn't about to debate his attractiveness, though, not when he was wiggling impatiently and waiting for her to hop into the tub. The water was comfortably lukewarm to combat the heat of the summer day outside, splashing slightly over the rim of the tub. Mituna had overfilled it accidentally. With her toe Latula tugged on the bath plug, letting some of the water slip through without Mituna noticing. It didn't work that well; the tub gave an obnoxious sucking noise and she winced. Mituna didn't seem to notice.

"Did you take your pill?" He asked, looking down at her as she settled comfortably into his lap. She leaned back against him and he raised wet hands, stroking them through her hair to dampen it.

"Yeah." She said, tilting her head back to look up at him and pressing a kiss to his chin. He beamed happily at her.

"Good. No forgetting our pills. The human mediculler said so."

A soft hum left Latula and she let him play with her hair. It was nice, sometimes, to have him look after her and worry about her. Sometimes it bugged her, but the more she went to therapy the fewer and further between those moments were. Now she just enjoyed the quiet, peaceful moments where she didn't have to move or think, just feel the softness of his hands as they combed tenderly through her hair and wove it into messy but well-intentioned braids.

That reminded her...

"You have therapy today," She said, opening one eye to look at him. "Feeling up to going this time? It's okay if you're not."

Mituna gave a thoughtful hum. He'd missed the last two, they both knew that, but the therapist he saw was more than understanding. She was patient, and kind, and never faulted him for missing appointments he didn't have the energy to make. Latula was seriously considering switching therapists to see his.

Finally, after a moment's silence, Mituna nodded. "Yeah." He said. "Yeah I can go today. Today's a good day."

Latula beamed at him and leaned up, pressing a kiss to his lips. "Proud of you." She murmured softly.

Mituna blushed, fumbled with her hair and looked away. "'S just an appointment." He said, flustered. "Missed the last couple, it's not like I'm doin' all that great--"

He found himself hushed by another soft kiss. He would have protested, but Latula's lips were soft and cool and just the right amount of plush. Plus, she still tasted like chocolate and syrup. He kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close.

--

A meteor struck Latula's treehouse hive. She swore, a panicked note to her voice.

"Tuna!" She said through her headset, watching her screen frantically. "Tuna, come on, get through! I can't jump until you do!"

*"I can't!" If Latula sounded scared, he was downright terrified. Frozen in place, Latula watched as he struggled to climb onto the roof of the impossibly large hive they'd built to reach his **[insert name for portal thing here]**. Her heart stopped as he slipped from the tile, grabbing on with one desperate hand and crying out in absolute terror. She cried out with him. "I can't do it! Tulip, help me!"*

"I can't - I don't know what to do!" Her breaths were coming quick and heavy now and

her heart hammered in her ears. Across the keyboard her fingers trembled, misspelling words as she typed frantic, panicky pleas for help to anyone in her session. No one listened. Why wouldn't anyone listen? Even Cronus had vanished - where was he?! He was supposed to be here!

On the screen Mituna had managed to swing himself up. Okay. Okay, this was going a little better. He could do this. They could do this. Latula watched him as he scrambled over the multiple rooftops and balcony railings in a half-assed attempt at parkour. Over her headphones she could hear his claws scraping against the sandpaper tiles as he scrabbled onto the final level of the toppling building. Her heart swelled with elation.

"Yes!" She cried, then clapped her hands over her mouth realizing that she'd screamed straight into the microphone. "Sorry, Tune!"

"It's okay!" Mituna sounded breathless and just as elated as she felt. "Okay - okay, I think I can lift myself from here, it's just a jump, right?" He tilted his head to look up at the portal above him. It seemed a mile away. How long had it been since he'd used his psi? Too long for something like this. He was out of practise. Fucking cullers.

"Yeah, just a jump!" Latula frantically worked at her own computer, glancing at the other feeds from the ten trolls that'd been roped into this with them. They were the last ones to go through. She scrambled to the top of her hive, struggling to keep her husktop steady. "Okay. Okay, you jump, and then I'll be right behind you in just a minute, okay? We might lose connection for a minute--"

Mituna wasn't listening. Latula heard the telltale crackle of his psi and the next moment, he was launching himself through the air towards the gate. She could see him rocketing towards it one minute, and the next - the next the feed was cut off.

He'd made it.

Latula sighed with relief and hung her head. The husktop, now useless, fell to the wayside and bounced off the precariously built hive with a firm crack. Latula looked up at her own gate and, with a loud grunt of effort, threw herself at it..

--

"Ready to go?"

Mituna's voice broke Latula from her reverie. In the time that it'd taken her to pull on her clothes he'd already braided her hair, pulled his own into a messy ponytail, and gotten his clothes on. Even his shoes were tied. Latula remembered a time when he couldn't even pull his jumpsuit off, but here he was sporting a pair of board shorts, a baggy tanktop and his old mismatched shoes and everything was on right and tidy. Her chest clenched. Pride swelled up inside her. Slowly she stood up, grabbing her shoes.

"Yeah, just give me a sec, babe." She murmured. Mituna fidgeted impatiently and whined.

"Come on, slowpoke!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming, hold on." Latula stood and stretched, feeling her back pop

from where she'd been hunched over her shoelaces for the last age and a half. Mituna tangled one arm with hers, keys already in hand, and half-dragged her to the door.

"You're so spacey today." He pointed out. When Latula gave him a confused look, he very obviously rolled his eyes and huffed as he tried to find the words to explain. "You're all - thinking about other things. Your pan isn't in your head, Tulip!"

"Where else would my pan be?" She teased him and he groaned aloud.

"You know what I *mean*."

Latula glanced at him, his expectant expression. She smiled warmly. He'd changed so much, but at the same time, not at all. She almost wished that she could see herself through his eyes, wondering if she'd changed any since they'd met. Who did he see when he looked at her?

That didn't really matter. Whatever he saw, clearly he still loved it. Loved her. She kissed his forehead sweetly and he bumped noses with her in an attempt to make the kiss meet his lips. She laughed and kissed him there, too.

"Doesn't matter, babe." She said. "Come on. We've got stuff to do today."

The question seemed to vanish from Mituna's mind. He nodded, stealing one more kiss as he opened the door.

"Ladies first?" He said.

Latula laughed and stepped outside.







by McSiggy #2



by Meridiantears

tactfulCultist [TC] began hassling threeprongedAuger [TA]

TC: hey, WHAT is PINK and GOLD and HAS not BEEN seen IN three DAYS?

TA: KZ 1'M N07 1N 7H3 M00D F0R 0N3 0F YOUR P0P CL0WNUDRUM5.

TC: SO the HEIRESS up AND pulls A houdini AND you're NOT bothered BY this?

TA: WHY WOULD 1 M155 7H47 817CH? 5UR3 YOU D1DN'7 M34N 70 M3554G3 C4?

TC: didn't YOUR visions OF oncoming DOOM entail RUNAWAY royalty?

TA: L457 1 CH3CK3D YOU D1DN'7 C4R3 480U7 4NY V1510N5 7H47 C0LL1D3D W17H YOUR R3L1G10N'5 5H17 PR0PH3CY.

TC: SERKET'S been ASKING around SINCE she WENT missing.

TC: SHE remembered YOU spouting ABOUT that GILLED ninjette KICKSTARTING the END.

TA: 0H 50 N0W 3V3RY0N3 W4N75 70 L1573N 70 7H3 CR4ZY P1558L00D 4ND H34R WH47 7H3 V01C35 1N H15 H34D H4V3 70 54Y!

TC: COME on, LEVEL with A brother.

TA: H0W 480U7 YOU L3V3L YOUR P4N W17H MY 8ULG3!

TC:) (OW ABOAT YOU DROP T) (-E DUMB FUCKIN MAC) (IN-E!!!

TA: WH47?

CC: the cruxeshit put it down so I can can get the fuck outta here!

CC: im gettin fuckin pummeled by rocks!

When the hell did you doze off? You just finished connecting with Meenah when... you can't remember. You were planning on taking your sweet time deploying her equipment while her lunar hideout got peppered with asteroids but your spare time's been robbed by an impromptu nap and now you have to get her in before she's sleeping with the craters.

AC: 𐀀^•ω•^𐀀< IF YOU'RE F33LING MEWDY, PURRHAPS YOU SHOULD FIND A HOBBY TO HELP YOU RELAX.

AC: (=^o^=)< I HAVE AN IDEA!

AC: (^ΦωΦ^)/< I ALCEMIZED MY LUSUS' STASH AFTER AMPURRA DEPLOYED THOSE MACHINES.

AC: (= 3 =)y-~~< COME BY MY LAND AND I'LL SMOKE YOU UP!

TA: 1'M N07 5M0K1NG C47N1P.

TA: W417, YOU G07 57UCK W17H H1M 45 4 53RV3R?

AC: (=^..^=)< I WOULDN'T SAY STUCK. MORE LIKE PAIRED!

TA: W0W, 1 KN3W 1 W0N 7H3 5H17 L0773RY H4V1NG K4NKR1 L3C7UR1NG M3 0N 1N73RN37 371QU3773 WH1L3 G01NG 7HROUGH MY 57UFF. 8U7 17 L00K5 L1K3 YOU G07 53C0ND PL4C3 1N 7H3 "1'M 7H3 H3R0 1N 7H3 W0R57 P01N7 4ND CL1CK 4DV3N7UR3" C0N7357.

AC: (^•ω•^)⌋-☆< HE'S NOT SO BAD. HE THINKS WE SHOULD HANG OUT MORE SINCE WE'RE BOTH SPELLCATSTERS.

TA: DON'7 73LL M3 YOU'R3 1N70 7H47 W1Z4RD 5H17 700.

AC: (=^ω^=)< MY CONSORTS COMMUNED WITH ME AFTER I ARRIVED HERE. THEY SAID I'M THE MAGE OF HEART!

AC: \ (=^•ω•^=) /< WHEN CRONUS FOUND OUT ABOUT MY TITLE, HE GOT EXCITED AND STARTED TELLING ME HOW HE GOT HIS SCAR AND HIS DESTINY TO DEFEAT THE EVIL WIZARD THAT GAVE IT TO HIM.

TA: YOU M34N H3 W45 H1771NG ON YOU.

AC: (=^ω'^=)< MAYBE I CAN USE MY NEWFOUND PAWERS TO HELP HIM FILL HIS QUADRANTS!

TA: 4R3 YOU 3V3N L1573N1G?

TA: F0RG37 1 45K3D 7H47.

AC: (𐀀^ω^𐀀)< I BET KURLOZ COULD PITCH IN AND FIND HIM A PURRFECT BLACK SUITOR. IMAGINE THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN A WIZARD-IN-TRAINING AND A RIVAL-TURNED-PARTNER!

AC: (=°-°=)< SCRATCHING AWAY AT HIS MENTAL BARRIER UNTIL THEY FIND A WEAKSPOT.

TA: W3LP, 7H4NK5 F0R 3NR1CH1NG MY D4Y W17H 4 GL1MP53 1N70 L4 L4-J0N L4ND.

AC: (=°⇐°=)< EVISCERATING HIS FAITH UNTIL IT'S JUST A MANGLED HUSK OF BROKEN DREAMS.

threeprongedAuger [TA] blocked artlessCupid [AC]

circesApprentice [CA] began hassling threeprongedAuger [TA]

CA: yo

TA: WH47 D0 YOU W4N7?

CA: vwovv rude

CA: can't a guy check in on a fellowv teammate vwithout getting attitude?

TA: CH3CK1NG 1N? 1'M N07 50M3 CR1PPL3D WR1GGL3R. PL4Y1NG CULL3R 15N'7 G0NN4 W1N YOU 8UCK37 P01N75.

CA: who said anything about buckets? i mean im downv if you vwant to get buckets invwolvwed. i just assumed you vwere using your usual raunchy vwocabulary to repel ANY8ODY that tries to givve you the time of night.

TA: WH47 D0 YOU W4N7?

CA: just vwanted to talk is all.

TA: 17'5 N3V3R JU57 70 74LK.

TA: L00K C4N W3 JU57

TA: N07 D0 7H15 R1GH7 NOW?

TA: MY H34D5 K1LL1NG M3

CA: another migraine-induced premonition, huh?

CA: doesnt it get exhausting, havwing nobody to talk to about the crazy shit that gets vwispered to you? vwouldnt it be nice to havve somebody to lend an ear, evwen if that ear also happened to havve the vwebbed tines of a fellowv coplayer, who also has a prophecy that nobody givves a shit about when he tries to explain it to them?

TA: YOU'R3 ON3 OF 7H3 N080D135 7H47 D035N'7 L1573N!

CA: maybe vve could get along better if vve had something to mutually bond ovver.

CA: like MAGIC

TA: H3R3 W3 G0

TA: D1D YOU M155 7H3 P4R7 WH3R3 1 M3N710N3D 7H3 H34D4CH3 7H47 M4K35 17 H4RD3R F0R M3 70 1N73R4C7 W17H YOU 455H0L35?

CA: the other day vwhile vve were on lopah, i tried this newv incantation on a rock, and guess vwhat? it started LEVWITATING! it was only for moment but it vwas so cool.

TA: 7H47 W45 M3 NUM8GL0835!

TA: 1 7H0UGH7 YOU WOULD H4V3 F1GUR3D 7H47 0U7 WH3N 17 5L4MM3D 1N70 YOUR F4C3 2 53C0ND5 L473R

CA: s seconds?

CA: oh, you mean tvwo seconds

CA: vwell, im vwilling to ovverlook some, albeit mean-spirited, hijinx for the sake of a budding relationship in the hopes that it vwill growv into something a little less platonic.

TA: 0H MY G0D

CA: vve could start vwith vwand practice. I can alchemize you a cool bicolored one and showv you some techniques.

TA: 1F YOU PL4Y3D W17H YOUR W4ND 45 MUCH 45 YOU PL4Y3D W17H YOUR 8ULG3 YOU WOULD 83 4 G0D D4MN 50RC3R3R 5UPR3M3.

CA: YEESH

CA: tcs messaging me, so ill leavve you to sulk and talk to him instead.

CA: im sure vwhatever he has to say is better than any vverbal garbage that passes your lips and vwill be more considerate of my feelings and vvalidate my beliefs.

circesApprentice [CA] ceased hassling threeprongedAuger [TA]

After celebrating the first sweep anniversary of entering this hell game, you take off for LOBAF to nurse another headache. The voices of the doomed are louder than usual. Maybe it was something in the cake? You wouldn't put it past Meenah to get bored of planet-hopping and teen drama and take you all out at once with a death-concoction of her own design.

Though at this point you would welcome the food poisoning.

The pro to holding the event on Meenah's planet was that yours was right next to hers, so you could fly back to your place and digest.

Hm?

You notice something small and fast soaring away from Kurloz's land. It always stood out in the medium as a spherical eyesore. Activity meant that he must have got back to his place already. You don't blame him for wanting to get out of there after the food was served. It was nice not being at each other's throats for a change but you knew that tranquility wasn't going to last long.

You try to focus on the object from where you're currently hovering. All you can tell is that it's flashing and purple. It kind of reminds you of...

It stops in a random location outside the veil and disappears. You figure the show's over until a distortion bubbles in the exact same spot. You can't make out what it is until it grows large enough for you to see that it was collapsing in on itself.

Oh for fuck's sake...

The patch of space begins engulfing everything in its vicinity. It's pull is strong enough to tug some of the closer meteors from Skaia's gravitational pull. Fortunately Derse was on the opposite side of the veil's ring or it would have been sucked in by now.

WHO THE FUCK SUMMONED A BLACK HOLE!?

You change course for LOTAM, figuring that's the place you'll most likely get your answer.

You arrive at the multi-colored hellscape and find its resident player at the base of the unfinished tower that was once his hive, looking up and admiring the vortex like it was a god damn sunset.

He wasn't alone. Damara was nearby leaning against the infrastructure, watching on with less enthusiasm. Meulin and Cronus were present as well, both staring into the void with the same empty, purple stares Meulin makes when she blurts excerpts from the clown bible.

Kurloz looks in your direction, his smile unfettered by sudden company. Before you can ask him "what the hell is going on!?", he raises his hand like he's holding something. Cronus mimics the same motion with his wand, aiming at you. It's white with intricate designs, nothing like the toy ones you saw him trying to combat the imps with. A retort mixed with innuendo dies in your throat when you see light sparking at the tip.

Meulin steps up while withdrawing her own pimped-out claws from her strife deck.

Damara also appears to be stepping up to the plate but then she passes you to focus on something else. She raises her hand and you stare out at the circus horizon to see what she was going to do. You expected one of the these stupid tents to get uprooted by telekinetic force but instead you hear a loud, distant boom and look over to see Horuss' land was knocked out of orbit and smashed into Kankri's.

LOCAS and LOPAH join the meteor belt as chunks of geo drifting at the mercy of zero-gravity. There's no way she pulled that off by herself, she must have used necropathy to enlist help from beyond the grave. Damara states something and it takes you a second to process her words and translate that she said "Nobody was on those planets".

That's right. Everyone else is back on LODAG, stuffing their faces with cake and oblivious to their imminent doom.

FUCK

You just wanted to go to your hive, crawl into coon, and sleep off that psycho's cake. But NO, you gotta play interstellar pinball with *this* psycho!

You're reminded that Megido isn't the only one stirring shit up when you dodge a shot of white light that singes a hole through the tent behind you. Meulin can't get to you as long as you're airborne but Cronus is another story. You ascend pass LOMAT's ozone to get out of the meat-puppet's firing range and return to your match of space-stickball.

Meulin's land begins to quake as it's being yanked from its rotation before succumbing to the hole's pull and leaving you down 9 planets. Damara's land remains intact despite being closer to the vortex than LOLCAT. No doubt her doing.

You decide it's your turn in celestial croquet and use your own planet as canon fodder for LODAG just in time to be blindsided by Cronu's land, a planet that had been eclipsed by Skaia moments ago.

Great. Now you have planetary debris AND pissed off angels.

Optic blasts just make them angrier and your job harder, so you use the space vacuum to your advantage by knocking the feathery assholes into its suction with LOWAA's and LOBAF's shrapnel.

How the fuck do you stop this thing? You remember Aranea blabbing about how SGRUB's game mechanics can serve different roles depending on the session. How a dead session causes a kernalsprite to become a black hole. -Safe to assume that was blinking, purple thing from earlier.- The wormhole's job is to bring the player's home planet into the medium. But it's *already* in the game. It already sucked in a land and wasn't appeased, then it ate the angels and that did no good. Maybe you need to use something bigger?

You look out into the incipisphere. The answer to your problem might be directly in the middle of this interplanetary clusterfuck. Skaia continues rotating, indifferent to the chaos surrounding it. It was larger than the lands and moons encircling it. Maybe large enough to trick the vortex into thinking its done its job.

It's either your co-players or the soon-to-be universe.

Yay, freedom of choice.

It's denser than the lands you were pushing around earlier and takes more juice on your end to get it moving. Megido seems to have caught on to what you're attempting because there's a strong force doubling down and pushing against you. You push on.

You feel something warm trickle down your upper-lip but you don't realize it's your nose bleeding until you taste blood a couple seconds later. Your headache's wracking your skull, your pan feels like it's being split in half. The voices get louder and louder until they become the source of the ringing in your ears instead of the echoing crushes of shattering planets. One voice swells until it drowns out all the others.

Yours.

You are now Kurloz Makara. Though it was only a sweep ago you received the vision of your session's demise as a futile glitch in need of resetting, it is only now you bring that premonition to fruition and what better way than by reenacting your messiah's rise to power through the witch of time's aid. Though this may involve mass destruction and killing your friends, the way you see it, the end justifies the means.

It costed a lot to alchemize that kernalsprite but it was worth every chunk of grist. Damara expresses actual frustration for the first time since the page of doom joined the fray and she orders you to do something about him.

You release your puppets and they hit the ground like abandoned dolls. You crack your neck and set to work. You concentrate on where he's located and once you find him, you reach into his skull and drive at the muscle responsible for his psionics. He fights you tooth and nail but he's overcome with pain as you scrape at the delicate flesh of his pan.

You drink his misery. Damara hears screaming in the distance and cracks a smile. He powers through the agony. He fights against your puppet strings but only succeeds in getting strangled on them. You can almost feel the blood leaking out of every orifice of his face as becomes overwhelmed by the exertion.

By the time he's lost all strength, Skaia's in reach of the black hole and becomes swallowed by it. Having absorbed the psuedo-universe, it shrinks shut and disappears. Not how he planned this unfolding, but the results were same.

Damara touches down, her quartz descending beside her.

TICK TOCK

Mituna smears gold blood on the ground beneath him as he tries to turn his head.

BREAK HEADS

You stand over him, watching the other struggle with basic motor function.

HONK HONK

Damara slices the air with her wand, causing Meulin's and Cronus' unconscious forms to disappear in a flash of red light and spinning gears. Her job done, she returns to her current time 2 sweeps into the future.

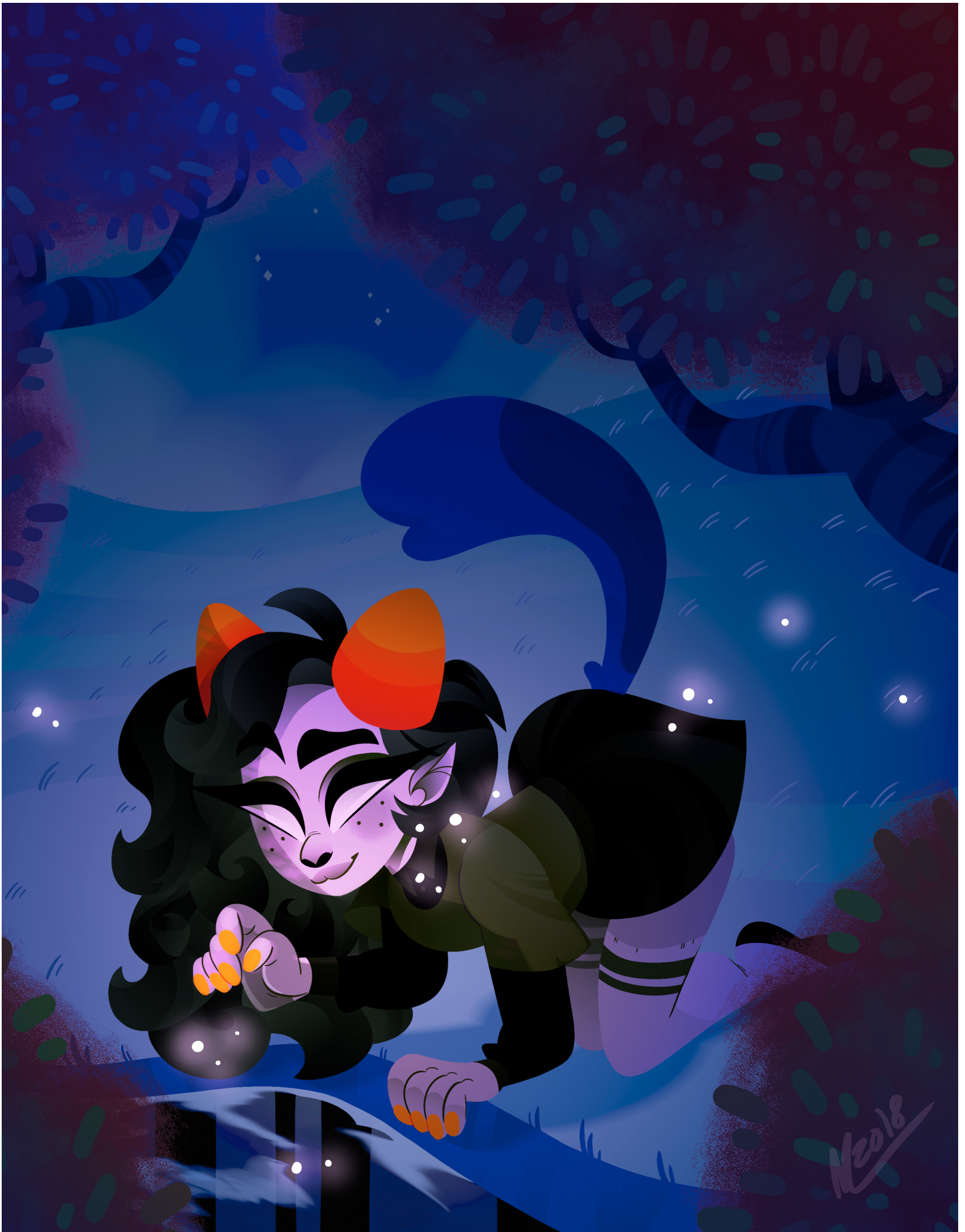
You remain with Mituna and finish what you started, erasing memories and damaging cells. By the time you're done, he's doesn't know up from down. You sit him up and stare at him. He starts to cry. You wipe the blood from his face with your sleeve and his crying is reduced to sniffing. You rub his cheek in a soft circular motion and he calms down.

His memory lapses and starts to babble-talk so you nod along.

by Veedragon 13-6









Not With a Whimper

Finding the book takes you by surprise, which in itself is something of a feat. You make it your business to ensure nothing catches you off guard; more impolite trolls would say you make it your business to make everything your business, but whatever the wording, it is a real bosom buddy of a strategy. No, the real curveball is the book itself.

You have been dead for a healthy bit of time (if you'll pardon the irony), but you can't actually recall any reading you've done since you all kicked the decidedly unsexy bucket. And it's not that you don't like the hobby! You are like a fountain of knowledge, except the fountain is inward, and you are a concave reservoir, but that does not roll off the tongue quite as well.

So far, your afterlife boredom has been appeased in a multitude of ways. You've rifled through Meenah's chests and flipped every coin in them, just because you could; you asked Kankri increasingly baiting questions until multiple friends begged you to stop; you re-painted your little booth, nicking one of your thumbs as a swatch to make it that perfect shade. Not like you need your blood, anyway, and Porrim gave it a smooch for good luck after she was done licking it off, benevolent as when you had your fling.

Reading, though. That's...new. You suppose that's the pleasant thing about reading, that if you have a good book, a tome that has just the right dialogue, or plot that drives forward with more ease than Pyrope's kickflips, it's an ageless habit. You're pretty goddamn ageless by now, you guess.

You set up shop at your booth, because it is your booth and you refuse to take a holiday. You have cash to burn, and your little gaggle of companions are frequently restless, prodding you with questions and bitching about this, that, the other thing. You carefully barkbeast-ear your page (you're on page two), and settle the book in your lap, and slide five boonbucks across the booth. Extrapolate, assuage, lather, rinse. When they leave, more or less satisfied, you're left to your devices.

And what devices they are.

It's really good.

Like, really good. Fascination unlike you have ever known grips you, and *everything* fascinates

you—to a certain degree! It's one of your finer traits. The narrative, novel as it is, prickles at something in your subconscious: you delve into the journal entries of someone you feel you have always known. Why shouldn't you have?

Imagine what you could have been.

Hell, imagine what you could be, with a little identity reshaping.

Time escapes you. Okay, time escaped you a very, very long while ago, back when time was still a word and not just another placeholder, like “yanno” for Cronus or “furthermore” for Kankri or a particularly weighty silence for Kurloz. But with this book—*your* book, when your internal monologue slips up—you could stay here an eternity, poring over these immaculately inked pages.

The world you've carved out for yourselves falls away. Instead, the journal's reality is—well, it's wilder, for one, bloodshed and intrigue written between the lines of the tight, curlicue script. You read until your eyes hurt, wipe your glasses on the hem of your dress, and keep reading anyway. What harm can you do yourself, really?

It seems to be the attitude this other you employed easily. You decide you would have gotten along famously with yourself, projections aside.

As you turn the pages with increasing fervour, it occurs to you that your cross-universal iteration was only part of a familiar cast. The jolt in your bones upon this discovery practically has you giggling, like you're three and threading psychic needles under the supervision of your *lusus*.

Speaking of psychic needles, you may as well share some of this information. Damara seems less likely to be interested in anything you say, though, no matter how much of your allowance you throw at her. A hefty block of text is dedicated to rumours that call Kankri to mind, but the last time you tried convincing him to let you talk at him for a minute or thirty he scolded you for your “internalized classism and highblooded saviour complex compelling you to offer me charity, implying that something either attributed to my caste, vertical economics, or long-standing aversion to criticism of my monologues was pitiable by means of financial compensation” and you had just started falling asleep at that point. You don't really need sleep either, but you could not help it, honestly!

There is another option, though. Another sizeable chunk of text has the cogs in your pan

whirring with a little more interest. Like any good lead, you follow it to its source, respooling a cosmic thread. Your hands seldom get sticky, after all.

You go fishing.

Honing your abilities to several fine edges seemed like a sensible thing to do, with all this free time, and it proves advantageous as you cast it like a fine net. It doesn't take much concentration, not really—maybe one day you'll have the opportunity to really try something amazing. See just how much you can accomplish.

You hear Cronus before you see him. His feet kind of drag and shuffle on the ground in a stuttered pace. "Nice to see you," you say, even though your eyes are glued to your journal.

He does not look thrilled when you do raise your gaze, though: it may have something to do with the blue film over his eyes. "I have a phone, you know," he gripes, flicking his fins like there's something on them.

"This was easier." You wave him over with two fingers. "I have something I want you to see."

Cronus decides to take this moment to start not wanting to be close to people. You roll your eyes. "Come *here*, Ampora."

He tips forward precariously, cursing under his breath when his elbows hit your counter. "Lay it on me," he says when he's shaken his hair back into place.

And for one uncharacteristic moment, you don't. This is *your* journal, isn't it? These are *your* feats and accomplishments, *your* loves and *your* losses, *your* irons in *your* fires. What has he done to deserve this? What has he done, in all his sweeps and campaigns and half-baked efforts to reclaim your attention across oceans, to deserve you?

Maybe time is not the only thing that is escaping you.

"...nea. Aranea?"

"Yeah. Yes." You toss your hair back, and turn the journal towards him, perhaps a little more forcefully than necessary.

Cronus grimaces, presumably at the assault of cobalt ink to his newly released blank-slate

oculars, before relaxing. You watch him for tells: he's as easy to read as your book, the slow sweeps of his fins, the rhythmic tapping of his index against the cover. The low whistle that tells you, more or less, where he is.

"Holy shit," he says.

It's rare that you find yourself agreeing with him. "It doesn't exactly conform to your preferred pastimes, but—"

"It's badass," interrupts Cronus. "Who gives a shit? This is some primo literature." You reach for it, on instinct, and he cocks an eyebrow. "We really had some interesting times, I guess."

"I guess," you echo, nodding along as you try to read upside-down. Your adjective-heavy prose makes it a little dizzying. "Wouldn't it be something? To have such...interesting times now?"

His eyebrow goes up even higher, until it threatens to disappear into his coiffe. "I mean. We're kids, Serket. Dead as doornails. No fleets, no conscription, no enemies. Kind of out of our hands, you get me?"

No! You want to say. No, you don't get Cronus! You don't get so many of your friends, just settling for this post-mortem existence with no further aspirations! The only one you can truly relate to is Meenah, and between the two of you rolling your eyes at each other it's more than a little tricky to formulate any concrete plans for your foreseeable eternities.

(You wonder, briefly, if you should share your findings with her, and put a pin in that idea.)

"You know, as an actual conversation partner, you leave lots to the imagination."

"I'll see you later, Cronus." You close the book on his fingers, but leave it with him.

He looks up sharply. "Where are you—"

You look at him over your glasses and grin. "I'm going to go find something interesting. Come find me if you want the same."

It feels good to stretch your legs. And even if you can't find anything on your own, things have a way of just...kind of falling into your lap. You are okay with this. You have an indeterminate number of useless resources like time at your disposal, after all.

Maybe you'll bring pen and paper. You know.

Just in case.

by Auxanges m_-5









Bloodied Destiny

-CaudraHypens

“Porrim, I don’t wish to sound dismissive of your idea, but I simply believe there’s nothing wrong with my current attire,” you state with the crossing of your arms. Honestly, ever since the twelve of you entered the game, Porrim has used every chance she has alone with you to complain. There’s nothing wrong with your pants! Yet she still demands something to cover your chest region, which is a preposterous idea.

“Kanny, I can see you shivering. You’re going to freeze to death before those underlings can get to us,” she comments, pointing at your slightly shaking frame. You’re not cold! It’s just that the sudden change of environment has caught you off guard, that’s all.

“Porrim! As I’ve said a multitude of times, *please* either use my real name or my ‘nickname’. I find your actions of endearment both presumptuous and triggering, so it’d be a relief if you ceased this behavior at once and save me from the hassle of explaining this to you every time.” She rolls her eyes at you and clicks her tongue against her lip piercing, shifting it *oh so slightly* to the right. Way to avoid the subject Kankri. Ten out of ten.

“You realize that your clothing is partially why no one takes you seriously, right? You look like a fool; wearing nothing but pants hiked up to your chest! At least find something with sleeves,” the jadeblood demands. You leave the livingblock with a huff of annoyance, hearing the couch cushion air out as she sits on it.

Entering your respiteblock, you head to one of your many storage units, pulling long black fabric out and rubbing it with your thumb. It’s silky smooth, which makes sense considering the origin of the material. It was produced from a type of night-flutterbeast that’s quite rare. Coaxing it into giving up its produce is even more difficult than finding one. These certainly aren’t your own, but a gift from Aranea. She had lost the need for them, so she passed them off to you in a gesture of kindness.

You slip them onto your arms, pinching and tugging the places that bunch up. Once the gloves lay smooth and straight, you exit the room, hoping this satisfies Porrim. When she notices you, a look of horror presents itself on her features.

“Kankri! What in the *world* are you wearing?!” she screeches as she draws closer to you. Her rainbow drinker luminescence is coming back, blinding you to the hand coming for you. In an instant, the gloves disappear from your arms, and you can see Porrim clenching them in her fist. “Where did you even *get* these?” she asks, clearly trying to avoid lashing out altogether at the fashion choice that *seems* to offend her.

"Why, they were a gift from Aranea of course. I must say, it's very well crafted," you say, hoping this'll distract her enough so you can grab the gloves and abscond away from her wrath. Instead, she looks down at them in a sort of fondness, before throwing them back at you. Well, that's half the mission complete.

"I see. I had no clue the two of you were that close." You smile internally. Aranea is Porrim's current red fling, so her inclusion in the conversation should get her off your back. "But that still doesn't help your case," she says judgmentally. Then again, when *isn't* the jadeblood judgmental. Porrim grabs you by your shoulder and marches into the depths of your abode, leaving you to drag helplessly behind her. She enters your respiteblock with you in tow, and you mentally curse yourself for lacking the hindsight to lock the room.

Depositing you on the floor unceremoniously, which causes you to yelp at the sudden lack of support, she turns towards your closet and flings it open, revealing the mostly barren insides. The hangers clack against each other as shifts them around, staring at each item before dismissing it, most likely because it doesn't suit her cause.

Eventually Porrim pulls out your onesie. It's a light peach color with grubs of all castes decorating it. You blush slightly at it's reveal, embarrassment controlling you. Why, oh *why*, did that have to be the *one* thing she pulled out? You make a noise, which you would later decline the emission of, as you hop to your feet and attempt to grab the nightwear from her. Alas, her grip is tight and steady, forcing you to wrench it around like a complete fool.

You hear a chuckle make it past her lips, and see one of her hands covering her mouth. Is she- She is. She's *laughing* at you! Oh the humanity! You rip it from her hold, which sends you staggering back a few paces. You glower at her, trying to show your imminent rage through your face since your tongue is tied at the moment. She doesn't even see it. God damn it.

Porrim calms herself quickly, a smile still present on her features. "Kanny, why didn't you tell me you had something so...*cute*?" she inquires, moving to ruffle your hair. You duck out of the way in the nick of time, and you're *certain* your face is still red as your blood.

The next couple of hours are spent lecturing her about privacy, more endearment, and how *not* to treat others property.

Do they really see who I'm trying to be?

0 0 0

"I hope this little talk has enlightened you as to how your violent and animalistic ways prevent you from a much more civilized lifestyle where your society functions less on impulse, and more on tact and dignity," you conclude. You turn back towards the imp in front of you, only to find it with a hole in its torso. Damn it.

“Cronus!” you exclaim, making aforementioned seadweller look in your direction. He still has Ahab's Crosshairs in his hands, and the tip seems to be steaming a bit.

“Yes, Kankri?” he says, genuine curiosity gleaming in his eyes.

“I was *about* to make that underling change its ways, which may have sparked a rebellion in others, helping us with our cause. But instead, you had to shoot it in the stomach, and make a perfectly good speech about how nonviolence is binding, completely worthless!” He shrugs with a hopeless smirk on his features, and starts heading towards a nearby cave. You rush after him, not yet finished.

He seems to hear your rapid footsteps and slows his pace, allowing you to catch up. “It was also rather stereotypical of you to shoot that poor imp, seeing as violetbloods are thought to be violent and ruthless. You claim you don't care about your blood, but you continue to let it control you!” you explain. Cronus seems to dismiss it.

“Look Kan, I don't care about my caste, and you know it. I'm a pretty chill guy, ya dig? It's just that the guy wasn't about to write home about your lesson. Either way, he would've continued to attack until it's minuscule brain screwed it over, or someone killed it. And knowing you, you wouldn't have taken the initiative.” You open your mouth to protest, but Cronus beats you to it. “Honestly, would you rather waste your time talking to an imp who probably couldn't understand a damn word you're sayin', or get rid of it quickly before it claws the living hell outta us?” You stay quiet, not really wanting to argue with him about the mental capacity that underlings may or may not have.

You fall behind him and casually follow until he stops at the mouth of the cave. Stalactites hang from the edge, dripping water onto the ground below. Inside is pitch black. You *think* you can see some stalagmites sprouting from the caverns floor, but you aren't really sure. A few sounds come from within, mostly dripping liquids, but there is an occasional grunt or squeak. Some sort of rodent, perhaps? Cronus readies his gun, prepared to fire at anything in his path. You roll your eyes, because he is *truly* living up to his caste expectations.

He advances cautiously, but you see no point in doing such, so you just waltz right in. Of course, you almost trip over a rock, and barely manage to catch yourself before falling, but no one has to know that. You squint, trying to see through the black haze. Unfortunately, it proves to be futile, and you just end up giving yourself a minor headache, which fades once you stop.

You jump as you feel something cold bump into you, and spin around quickly. Oh. It's just Cronus. “Sorry, didn't mean to startle you, chief,” he says apologetically. You scoff and march onwards. Honestly, people have to be careful about touching others, in case they have an aversion to it or simply don't like it!

As you walk, more noises seem to emerge. Scratching, feet padding on the floor, exhales of breath. You'd be lying if you claimed it wasn't disconcerting. Your stature becomes rigid with

anxiety, and you whip your head frequently, checking for the source, but each time you see nothing.

This continues for a few minutes; you being paranoid with Cronus right behind you. Eventually, the walls seem to open up, creating a room of sorts. There's no other passageways in it, meaning this is the end of your little expedition. You visibly relax, tensions melting away. Your companion, however, swiftly turns left and cocks the gun, aiming at a medium sized boulder.

"What are you doi-" You're cut off by him putting a hand over your mouth. You slap at it while simultaneously admiring how he can hold that large weapon upright with one hand. His grip fails to relent, so you give in, letting it stay glued to your face. His gaze remains steady, waiting for a hint of movement. A rolling sound can be heard and a blur makes its way around you. Cronus begins to fire at the figure, missing each time.

The room is a whirlwind of noise and confusion, until two hands settle on your shoulders. You jump and let out a small noise of surprise, while the seadweller points the gun at whatever's behind you, then groans.

"Dammit Tula! The hell were you doing in here? Nearly gave Kan a heart attack and I coulda blasted your brains out." He runs a hand through his hair and pops Ahab's Crosshairs back into his sylladex. It takes you a second to register what he just said, but when you do you feel very nervous for no good reason.

"Aw, c'mon! I thought it'd be a sweet trick to play on the two of you. Man, you should've seen Kankri's face when I came up to him!" she says with a slight chuckle. You meet her gaze and back away from her. No, it's not because you feel hot to the touch when you're around her! She's just...loud. Yeah, she's too loud to be next to in this cavern. Echoes and what not.

Cronus begins to chase her around, and trips on a few cracks and stones, cursing with each one, while you sit on a small rock, watching the chaos unfold and occasionally making comments about safety and no, Cronus, don't try to grab her there! That can be qualified as harassment!

At this point, you just want to get back to your hive and sleep.

Could conversation really help avoid devastation?

0 0 0

You were idly reading underneath a tree in Aranea's land, which is your designated meeting place, when you heard shouting a few yards off. You wouldn't have gone to check on it, if it didn't persist and make it *impossible* to focus on the text. So here you are, walking where you *think* it's coming from. God, you hope you're not going the wrong way.

Turns out your ears didn't deceive you, as you can see two figures advancing on each other a few feet ahead. It looks like it's Damara and Meenah, about to slit each others throats again.

“ああ、私は間違っている?” the East Beforan woman asks. You have no clue how to translate her, so you usually go off of tone to determine what she's saying. No one can understand her, except for Rufioh. The others have a rough jist of what she's saying sometimes, but you're always lost, so you tend to avoid her.

“Look, the guy broke up with you 'cause you ain't worth giving a glub about. He got shored of your pathetic ass and decided to hook up with horse buoy. *Maybe* if you were a lil more interesting than him, you could've stayed in your shitty relationship. But you weren't, so here you are being a sad beach who can't even *try* to get revenge or whatever,” Meenah responds. Wow, this is *not* going to end well.

You step in between the two ladies and stare at Meenah, hoping you can get her to back off. “Meenah, please. Is that how you talk to your friends? Please stop rubbing recent events in Damara's face. It's rather uncouth. Plus, you're trying to encourage fighting between peers, which is something I cannot stand for. Violence is no joke Meenah, and if something serious were to happen, you would be to blame. I'd prefer if we all stayed reasonable and diplomatic, instead of going to extreme measures like you're using,” you say calmly. Meenah glares at you, while Damara remains indifferent.

“And Damara, I'd suggest you try to avoid any animosity towards Meenah, even though she is being rather rude. It's important to remain closely bonded with one another in these times, seeing as all our lives are on the line.” Damara blinks at you, then sneers at the heiress, before stomping off. Crisis averted?

“Listen here buoy, you don't have any right to stick your little nose in our business. Just 'cause you see yourshellf as some kind of 'leader' doesn't mean you are. Everyone here knows that I run this team, they just let you play pretend because they feel *bad* for you. What we need it everyone to get angry so we can beat this thing. Staying all mellow won't get us anywhere except into our graves, and I don't know about you, but I'm not willing to die here,” Meenah declares, jabbing her finger into your chest. One finger becomes five as her hand pushes off of your chest, sending you backwards, right onto your rump. When you dust yourself off, she's already a speck in the horizon.

Is peace really the solution?

0 0 0

And now, you see how they were right. No one ever took you seriously, like Porrim said. You can't just talk your way out of fights with the enemy, like Cronus explained. And peace wasn't the answer, just like Meenah told you. You were wrong in so many ways, that it's almost laughable, if it wasn't so tragic. You thought you could help change things for the better. But

now you see what you really are. In the split seconds before Meenah activates the Tumor, it rings in your head.

A Seer who couldn't see what fate his blood gave him.

by Caudrahypens ☯-6









THE HERO RUFIO AND THE WIZARD'S SECRET

On a green hill overlooking a verdant valley the hero Rufio stood proudly, braced on his mighty lance, gazing down on the rural village below. Its inhabitants toiled in the shadow of the great Mount Meretricious, and at its peak the Dreadfort Duplicity where dwelled the Dark Wizard. The hero turned his steely gaze north to the shadowed jagged shape of the fort, looming over the land like a dragon above a flock of helpless sheep. Though the wizard had long cast his ominous presence from that peak it was only recently that he had made good on the implicit threat of his existence, causing dire and deadly mischief through the land. Most dreadfully, he had demanded the first born sons of every family in the realm, delivered to his doorstep by the last dark day of December. It was this the hero Rufioh intended to stop, at any cost, with the help of the allies that had agreed to meet him here in secret this very day.

It was at this moment, as though on cue, he heard the sound of hoofbeats galloping towards him and turned to see what horseman approached, only to discover the term horseman more literal than he'd anticipated. Galloping towards him was-

— —

"A centaur?" Rufioh interrupted the introductory monologue, putting down his character sheet. "Is that... really a playable race, doll? I didn't see it in the handbook you lent me..."

Across the table, Horuss cleared his throat, cheeks tinged cobalt.

"I requested special dispensation from our magnanimous dungeon master to play a homebrew species hoof my own devising," he explained. "None of the default races were, I felt, really neighing to me and I was concerned that I would be unstable to adequately project onto, and thus play, a character that did not more foal-ly encapsulate the esoteric equine nature of my soul-"

"I helped him build his character sheet," Porrim cut in, lounging behind a DM screen at the head of the table, holding a pair of d10's like a bored heiress dangling a particularly disappointing glass of wine. "It should be balanced enough for this campaign."

"Why didn't ya tell us ya were allowin homebrew?" Cronus asked across from her, his feet up on the table and his character sheet barely filled out.

"Because I'm not," Porrim replied, not looking at him.

"If Horuss gets ta play a nonstandard race, I ought ta be able to also!"

"You want to play a centaur?" Porrim asked, finally deigning to look in his direction, which took some of the heat out of his indignation.

"No," he said, and Porrim started to move on, foolishly, only for the inevitable continuation. "I want to play a human."

"Of course," Porrim muttered, rubbing her temples. Rufioh had a feeling it would be a long night.

"I got projection issues and shit too!" Cronus declared defensively.

"Fine," Porrim said quickly, grabbing his character sheet, scratching out his race, and writing "human" over it. "You're human. Which, mechanically speaking for the purposes of this session, is exactly like being a troll."

Cronus nodded, satisfied.

"I mean, I guess I... would have liked to have known too," Rufioh admitted, shrugging like it didn't matter even though it clearly did.

"Why?" Cronus asked before Porrim could. "You're playing the most standard character I've ever seen. I figured ya just copied the example character from the beginning of the player's manual."

"What's wrong with being a troll fighter?" Rufioh asked, a little flustered.

"Nothing, it's fine," Porrim said quickly. "If we could continue--"

"It's boring, that's what's wrong," Cronus argued, talking over her. "This is supposed to be wish fulfillment and shit. Even pony boy's got the spirit of it. You just made yourself! Ya even gave your character your name!"

"Haha, I mean, I don't think so?" Rufioh said, looking away. "I mean... It isn't actually my name. It's 'Rufio,' like, without the h? That's... pretty different!"

"Can we just keep playing, please?" Porrim growled.

"Whatever." Cronus flopped back into his chair and put his feet on the table again. "This is kind of a bust anyway. No offense to you nerds, but I only agreed to this geek shit because Porrim promised that Meenah would be here. What happened with that, toots?"

"She would only play if I paid her," Porrim said with a sigh. "And also let her start at level 100."

"What about Latula?" Cronus pushed. "Or Meulin? I bet Meulin woulda shown up in costume! We coulda had kitty titties in a chainmail bra!"

"Meulin wouldn't play without Kurloz," Porrim said, flipping through the monster manual for something to punish Cronus with later. "And Kurloz thinks D&D was designed to tempt the youth away from the messiahs and onto a path of sin and heresy and like, spending their weekends playing make believe instead of getting stoned at church or whatever. Latula and Mituna were interested until they heard you were playing. They bailed last minute."

"Ah, fiddlesticks," Horuss said with a frown. "Pardon my language. I do believe Meulin would hoof enjoyed this greatly, though I understand her choosing to shy away for the sake of her matesprit. And Latula and Mituna, with their extensive gaming knowledge, would likely hoof been incredibly usefoal team members."

"Nah, they were both playing joke characters," Porrim said with a shrug. "Mituna found a loophole that gave him infinite spells slots so long as he spoke solely in profanity. Latula was playing a wizard whose only spells were create water and power word kill."

"That doesn't sound so bad-"

"Named Barak Owobama."

"Oh."

"Kankri would only play if I let him DM, which I wouldn't inflict on my worst enemy," Porrim continued. "And I didn't even bother asking Damara, because she would have just flipped me off and said something disgusting in Eastern Alternian. Despite that, she will probably take not getting invited as a personal offense and try to murder me later. So, fair warning, if she breaks in here while we're playing, you're all honor bound to defend me, per the oath you agreed to when you filled out your character sheets."

"Wait," Rufioh said, flipping his character sheet over and squinting at the fine print he'd just noticed. "I don't remember agreeing to-"

"What about Aranea?" Cronus interrupted. "She'd love this nerd shit."

"I actually asked her first," Porrim said, setting aside her manual. "She agreed, but she's still working on her character's backstory. She's promised to join us when she's finished."

"So she's not playing then?" Cronus assumed.

"Pretty much. It was approaching novel length last time she sent it to me for approval."

Cronus groaned, tipping his seat back onto its hind legs. "In that case I might as well hit tha road. No point in bein here if there ain't any honies ta impress. I got other important irons in more promiscuous fires, if you get what I'm saying."

"Pardon me," Horuss asked. "I know you are disinterested in pursuing a relationship with me because my STRONG physique causes you feelings of inferiority and triggers your humankin body dysphoria, or so Kankri tells me-"

"Wow, yeah, remind me ta thank him for makin my personal struggles tha subject a daily gossip."

"- but are Rufioh and Porrim not attractive enough to meet your aesthetic requirements for a night of cooperative gaming?"

Rufioh's face turned bronze while Porrim laughed so hard she nearly upset her soda.

"I simply think he's doing you a disservice to imply that there are no 'honies' at this table," Horuss insisted.

"I appreciate you trying to defend my honor, doll," Rufioh said, clearing his throat and patting the other troll on the shoulder. "But you're kind of throwing me to the sharks here..."

"Relax, toots," Cronus interrupted, rolling his eyes. "No offense, but you've got way too much emotional baggage for me. Sure you're hot for a rusty, but I've got ta focus on my own issues right now, ya dig?"

"And Porrim?" Horuss pressed.

Cronus glanced at Porrim, who was smiling at him across the table in the way a purrbeast smiles at a fluttercritter it is about to spend several hours tearing into tiny pieces. He swallowed. Rufioh could see a sheen of sweat on his brow.

"Even I've got my standards," Cronus claimed, his attempt at a haughty dismissal of the subject spoiled by the way his voice cracked.

"Cronus doesn't date anyone who could top him," Porrim explained while Cronus sputtered in indignation. "And more importantly, as I require at least three players for this campaign, he will be staying and playing tonight, or Kankri will find out about the time Cronus recorded one of his sermons and remixed it with that video of the screaming goat."

"You wouldn't." Cronus's fins flared in horror.

"It was a very catchy tune. I'm sure he'd appreciate it. I saved the grubtube video actually, I could send it to him right now-"

"Fine!" Cronus said as Porrim took out her palmhusk. "Fine! I'll play. Christ, you know you're worse than Meenah sometimes?"

"Thank you," Porrim replied, putting her phone away. "I appreciate that. Now, where were we? Rufioh's fighter had just met Horuss's centaur ranger..."

— —

Though initially startled by his companion's unusual appearance, Rufio was grateful for whatever help he could get in his quest to defeat the evil wizard. Few had the courage to take on such a powerful foe! But with only the two of them they would require more than courage. Fortunately, the centaur had heard a rumor of a mysterious stranger in town who claimed to know the Dark Wizard's secret. Together, they made their way into the village and shortly found themselves at the tavern, where they found an unusual bard with exotic human features sitting near the fire-

— —

"-absolutely covered in bitches," Cronus said with a sweep of his arm, as if to indicate all the bitches draped over him as he sat at the card table in Porrim's basement block.

"Why exactly would you be covered in bitches?" Porrim asked.

"Uh, because I'm hot and an awesome musician, obviously?" Cronus replied.

"Roll for performance."

Cronus grumbled as he spent a minute trying to remember how rolling for performance worked, then threw his dice.

"...charisma modifier, plus my ranks in performance," he muttered scratching his head. "Uh... six! Six is pretty good, right?"

Porrim gave him an almost pitying look.

"There's a few bitches," she said, charitably in Rufioh's opinion. "Hanging around. Looking kind of sorry for you. It's obvious this bard has only recently taken up music and has little skill."

"That's hoofbeast shit!" Cronus declared, standing up and slamming his hands on the table hard enough to upset the player tokens. "I'm a great musician!"

"You are," Porrim replied. "Your character is level one, and you only put one rank into your performance skill."

Cronus flopped back into his chair, cursing under his breath.

"So, haha," Rufioh cut in before they could get any further off track, fixing his token and sliding it into the tavern on Porrim's hand drawn map. "Uh, me and Horuss approach the bard to ask if he's the one who knows how to beat the evil wizard..."

— —

"Yeah, I know a thing two about the Dark Wizard," the bard admitted with a shrug, strumming his badly tuned lute. "But I don't know why I should tell a couple of no account farm hands like you. You obviously wouldn't stand a chance."

"Regardless, we are sworn to try," Rufio insisted, words ringing with confident certainty. "I think if we work together there's nothing we can't defeat!"

"Our hope is that you know of a vulnerability substantial enough to allow us victory despite our disadvantage," added the centaur.

"I don't think you schmucks could pull it off even with all the advantages in the world," the bard replied, shaking his head. "But I'll tell you what. Prove me wrong and I'll give you the secret."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Rufio asked.

The bard rose slowly to his feet, throwing back his cape with a dramatic flourish.

"With... a dance off!"

— —

Rufioh and Horuss both looked at Porrim expectantly while Cronus continued to pose, one foot on the table.

"No, keep going, I want to see where he goes with this," Porrim said, grinning.

— —

So the mighty heroes engaged in a legendary dance off. A mythic event that covered the tavern in glitter, redefined the art of dance, and went down in history as "Probably Some of the Worst Dancing Anyone in the Tavern Had Ever Seen, Especially Considering None of Them Were Even Drunk."

The bard was declared to have won, though by a very narrow margin, and a very lenient definition of "won."

"Well, since I beat ya, I clearly can't give ya the secret," the bard said, as Rufio and the centaur hung their heads in defeat. "But ya did prove ya got moxie. I'll give ya another shot. Yo, tavern babe! Didn't ya say ya had a rat problem in this place?"

With the tavernkeeper's reluctant permission, they made their way down into the building's basement in search of rats. How the centaur was maneuvered down the stairs was not discussed.

"This should be really easy, even for losers like you two," the bard said, gesturing to the large, dusty cellar full of dried food and kegs of alcohol. "Just murder a few rats. It shouldn't take any time at all if you're actually heroes capable of beating the Dark Wizard."

Rufio stepped forward, trying to steel himself as he searched the darkness for rats, when the centaur cleared his throat.

"I believe I must abstain from this quest on moral grounds."

"What?" the bard asked.

— —

"What?" Cronus repeated.

"As a lawful good character," Horuss explained, "I believe it is against my morality to kill innocent animals."

"I'm... kind of uncomfortable with killing animals too," Rufioh confessed, relieved Horuss had brought it up. "Even if they are fictional."

"How are we supposed to accomplish anything if you guys won't kill shit?" Cronus demanded.

"I'll kill things that deserve it," Rufioh said defensively. "Just, you know, not innocent animals."

"Don't worry," Porrim said. "I was expecting this."

— —

"It is against my nature to harm any living thing that has not harmed me first," the centaur continued.

"But rats are nasty!" the bard pushed. "They spread disease and shit!"

"They are simply animals, doing what they must to survive."

"Maybe we could lure them out?" Rufio suggested. "Or we could go get a bunch of cats and-"

— —

"Oh, by the way, roll perception and acrobatics," Porrim announced.

The other three trolls exchanged a worried look.

— —

Distracted by their discussion, Rufio failed to notice that, though most of the basement floor was bare dirt, one section - the section they were standing on - was covered in old wooden boards. Old wooden boards that were beginning to bend and creak under the combined weight of Rufio's armor, the centaur's two-thousand pound draft horse body, and the bard's massive, earth shattering ego.

Before they could so much as notice, let alone jump out of the way, the boards gave out and the three adventurers plummeted down into the darkness.

They landed with a splash in what they quickly gathered to be a sewer, judging by the damp, the smell, and the general quantity of slime. They quickly established that climbing back out was not an option. Neither did it seem likely that any amount of yelling would bring anyone to come help them out.

"We'll just have to walk until we find another exit," Rufio said at last. "It's just the town sewers. It can't be too difficult."

"Why did you have to say that?" the bard groaned. "Can I at least ride tha horse guy? This water is ruinin my nice shoes."

"Absolutely not," the centaur replied immediately.

They slogged on through the sewers, the water level fluctuating between ankle deep and waist deep as the tunnels wound, maze-like, below the city streets. It was terrible, filthy conditions, but the hero Rufio was confident and determined. He would have to face worse things than sewage when he fought the Dark Wizard! He strode on through the sludge undeterred, his loyal centaur friend and less loyal bard associate at his side.

They'd been walking for more than an hour, making Rufio wonder just how big this city could be.

"How long do these tunnels go on for?" the bard whined. "This is boring and my clothes are ruined!"

"It can't possibly be much further," Rufio tried to assure him. "These are clearly functioning sewers. They have to let out somewhere or-"

— —

"Hey guys," Porrim interrupted. "What order are you walking in?"

"Uh, I'm probably walking next to Horuss," Rufioh said with a shrug, and Horuss nodded.

"I'm behind them," Cronus said quickly.

"Oh good," Porrim replied, smiling.

"Wait, I changed my mind!" Cronus tried to correct. "I'm in front!"

"Suit yourself," Porrim said casually. "By the way, what's your passive perception?"

"Oh no."

— —

As the bard took his next step, they heard an ominous click. Rufio tackled the bard into the scummy water, just in time to avoid a volley of poison darts shot from a crevice in the wall which would absolutely have hit him had Rufio been a second slower. They emerged from the water, sputtering and gasping, and carefully avoiding the spot where the bard had last stepped.

"Great," the bard muttered. "Now I'm soaked! This adventure could not get worse."

— —

"Hey Cronus, roll perception."

"....seven."

"A rat snuck up and bit you. Roll a fort save to avoid catching a hideous sewer rat disease."

"Son of a bitch."

— —

"Why are there traps in a sewer?" the centaur observed, inspecting the trap mechanism thoughtfully. "That seems very unwise, and potentially hazardous to maintenance personnel."

"I don't think they're supposed to be down here," Rufio guessed astutely, pulling a dart out of the far wall where it had sunk a half inch into the stone. "I think these are goblin made. Look at the distinctive fletching!"

"Why do you recognize goblin arrows?" the bard asked skeptically.

"Goblins under the command of the Dark Wizard murdered my family," Rufio said, his gaze distant, snapping the arrow in his fist dramatically.

"So, you're okay with killin em then?"

"What?"

"Ya ain't gonna chicken out again like with the rats?"

"I- no! I mean, I can't just assume they're the same goblins and kill them on sight. Not all goblins are evil. There are plenty of nice, law abiding goblins."

"I doubt the nice, law abiding goblins go around laying traps in sewers," the centaur pointed out. "And if their traps are here, it is likely they are not far behind. We should be prepared to fight."

Rufio nodded in agreement and drew his sword. The centaur readied his bow and the bard clutched his mandolin. They proceeded cautiously, on careful watch for traps, evading several more before they saw dim lights and heard the sound of voices in the distance. Sneaking closer, they saw a large cistern, packed with goblins. A hastily erected camp circled a central fire where the goblin warriors gathered, bristling with weapons.

"It's a war party," Rufio whispered. "Under the banner of the Evil Wizard! They must be readying for a sneak attack on the town!"

"We must stop them," the centaur said, gripping his bow.

"Or we could leave?" the bard suggested. "Go around em? Find the way out of this sewer and inform the town so they can bring an army down here, rather than three first level scrubs?"

"They're clearly planning to attack soon," Rufio argued. "If we end up wandering around in these sewers all night we might be too late!"

The bard grimaced. "All right. But you guys better defend me. I ain't built for front lines combat!"

"I'm not certain we could take them all at once," the centaur observed. "Perhaps if we draw them off..."

"Good idea," Rufio agreed. "I'll circle around behind those tents and pick off the three over there. You get those three near the entrance. When that patrol comes by, Cronus, wait until they're out of eyesight of the cistern, then get their attention and make them chase you. You can lead them right into Horuss's arrows."

"Like hell," the bard hissed. "I ain't gonna get killed while you two are playin hero!"

"You'll be fine," Rufio insisted. "Horuss will be close by if you need back up. And I believe in you. I believe in all of us. Let's go be heroes!"

Fifteen or twenty chaotic minutes later, sitting among the carnage and assorted goblin bits, Rufio did not feel particularly heroic.

"Well," the bard said, shaking goblin off of his fancy hat. "That didn't go exactly according to plan."

"I mean, all the goblins are dead and we're still alive," Rufio pointed out. "I'd say that's a pretty optimal outcome!"

"It could certainly have been worse," the centaur agreed, retrieving one of his arrows from a goblin's eye socket.

"That was smart, shooting the leader in the throat before he could give them any orders," Rufio told the centaur, smiling. "And Cronus, good thinking leading them back into those traps!"

"Yeah, what can I say? I'm a tactical genius," the bard replied modestly.

"You appointed yourself most admirably as well," the centaur said with a proud flick of his tail. "A very successful endeavor."

"Right," Rufio said, wiping off his sword and sheathing it. "Let's loot this place and get the heck out of here."

They scavenged what they could from the camp, looking not just for gold but for clues as to why the Dark Wizard might have been planning an attack on the town. They found a decent amount of gold, a wooden flute, and a cache of weapons.

"These are all human sized," Rufio observed. "The goblins couldn't have been planning to use them."

"They are newly forged as well," the centaur pointed out. "Though of rather shoddy material..."

"Shoddy, but cheap to alchemize," the bard said, flipping through a ledger they'd found among the weapons. "And check this out. Bill of sale for Thorvald's Arms and Armors in town."

"The goblins were going to sell the weapons?" Rufio asked, suddenly worried he'd murdered a bunch of legitimate entrepreneurs. The bard laughed.

"Of course not, stupid. The Dark Wizard was going to stage a surprise attack to freak everyone out so they'd go buy weapons to defend themselves. Then they take advantage of the demand to sell these weapons through Thorvald's at ten times what it cost to make them."

"Why?" Rufio asked, baffled. The bard shrugged.

"Money, I imagine."

Once they'd gathered everything they could carry they headed out, finding the exit not far beyond the cistern. They informed the city guard of what they'd found, then headed back towards the tavern in hopes of a hot meal and a change of clothes.

"I'm the bard, I should have it."

"It might be magic. I just want to get it checked out before you accidentally curse yourself."

"I hope it is cursed and it melts your selfish lips off, loot hoarder."

"Well," the centaur interrupted Rufio's argument as the tavern came into view. "I would say we have proven our skills far more thoroughly than we might have by killing a few innocent rats. It is time for your end of the deal, bard."

The bard, still annoyed about not getting to keep the flute they'd found in the goblin camp, shrugged, unimpressed.

"Sure, you did fine," he said. "But that wasn't the quest you were on. You were supposed to get rid of the rats, and the rats are still there. I don't owe ya shit."

"But we saved the town!" Rufio complained. "You've got to tell us the Dark Wizard's secret!"

"I don't got to do nothing," the bard sniffed, turning away. "Not until you've dealt with those rats at least."

Rufio and the centaur exchanged a glance, both considering whether it was worth it to punch the other man.

— —

Before Rufioh could roll to punch Cronus's character (or better yet just actually punch Cronus) Porrim passed him a small slip of paper. He read it quickly, and grinned.

— —

"Hey Horuss," Rufio said. "Hand me that flute."

"Finally come ta your senses about proper loot distribution?" the bard asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nope," Rufio replied. "Just felt like playing a little music."

He put the flute to his lips and, despite his inability to play any musical instrument, a haunting tune instantly issued from the humble wooden recorder. A second later, a wave of rats rushed out of the tavern and all the surrounding buildings, running to Rufio's feet. He turned and, gesturing with the flute, sent them all running directly out of town.

As the last of the rats vanished, he turned back around, hands on his hips.

"There," he said. "The rats are dealt with. Now, tell us the Dark Wizard's secret."

"Fine," the bard grumbled. "I didn't want your crummy rat whistle anyway. Here it is. The secret of the Dark Wizard is...."

— —

"I don't know," Cronus said. "Porrim never told me."

"What?" Rufioh asked, turning to Porrim. "Well what is it?"

"I think that's a good place to stop for the night," Porrim said, folding up her DM screen. "See you all next week?"

Despite their best arguments, Porrim refused to tell them. She didn't tell them next week either, when the city, in gratitude for their role in stopping the goblin threat, invited them to a fancy masquerade, where they soon found themselves investigating the murder of a duke. She didn't tell them the week after that either, when the corrupt chancellor who'd killed the duke threw them into a mimic and puzzle infested dungeon. By the next week, Rufioh didn't even bother to ask as they escaped the dungeon to find a small village that was nightly besieged by the dead, brought back to life by an artifact the Dark Wizard had planted there to drive down property values. Week after week they met, each time for a new exciting adventure. By the end even Cronus had stopped pretending he didn't want to be there, at least in part because he'd discovered that he could roll to seduce almost anything they encountered, a tactic that never failed to bring groans from everyone else at the table, and which almost always failed horribly. He barely survived the time he crit failed while trying it on a dragon. But Rufioh had sacrificed a wishing token given to him by Gnome Princess to resurrect the bard. Despite everything, he'd grown attached to the character. Cronus, when not in the presence of people he was trying to impress and/or pail, was honestly kind of tolerable.

The hero Rufio, already very confident, grew more confident every day, soon becoming a reliable and respected leader. The centaur earned kingdom wide recognition for his archery skills and was recognized in every town they visited. The bard's charisma grew with every level, earning him the fame and fortune he'd hoped for, though he seemed by the end to be more interested in the lasting friendship he'd built with his party members.

They were level ten the night they arrived at Porrim's to find an out of place black curtain hanging behind her.

"What's with the-"

"Don't ask," Porrim said, cutting Rufioh off and rubbing her eyes. "Let's just get started. Last time we played, you had just finished calming the earth giant at the heart of the Gnoll's ancestral caverns, putting an end to the cataclysmic earthquakes threatening the realm."

"All thanks to Rufioh deciphering that riddle about the crystal clusters on its back," Horuss said, looking at the other troll with pride and affection. Rufioh blushed.

"I mean, I never could have worked it out if Cronus hadn't put it to sleep with that lullaby so I could get a good look at the things..."

"Yeah, that was pretty great of me," Cronus said with a grin, then cleared his throat. "And, ya know, neither of us could have pulled off the strength rolls to remove tha infected crytals, so Horuss helped too."

Horuss beamed and Rufioh patted his hand, laughing.

"Alright," Porrim said, handing Cronus a folded sheet of paper. "As you leave the Gnoll caves, the grateful cheers of the Gnolls still ringing in your ears, the bard pulls you aside-"

"Holy shit, seriously?" Cronus said loudly, reading the note she'd handed him.

"Just start!" Porrim urged him.

— —

"So it's been a while since we started traveling together," the bard said. "We've been pulled into one ridiculous adventure after another since we met, and all this time I've never told you what you actually came to me to learn. To be honest, I was avoiding it. I might never have told you, but I'm starting to think you guys really could take the wizard down."

"Oh my god," Rufio said.

— —

"Oh my god," Rufioh said, leaning across the table. "Is this it? You're really going to finally tell us the Dark Wizard's secret?"

Cronus nodded, grinning.

— —

"The secret of the Dark Wizard is..."

Rufio held his breath, heart racing. This was it! The culmination of his greatest quest was almost at hand!

*"...I **am** the Dark Wizard."*

— —

A moment of silence followed the revelation, broken by a single word.

"Horseshit."

Rufioh sputtered with surprised laughter. Horuss, cheeks tinted blue, cleared his throat.

"Pardon my language," he said. "But that doesn't make a salt lick of sense. There is no conceivable way that a level one bard whoof rolled a critical failure attempting to seduce a hag is the Dark Wizard."

"If you'd let me finish, I'd explain," Cronus said, looking a little sour.

— —

"I was the Dark Wizard, up until about a half a sweep ago, when I summoned an evil spirit. It was supposed to serve me. Instead it overpowered me, drained all my magic, and threw me outta my own fort! Now it's up there, pretending to be me and pulling all of these dumb weird scams. I never scammed anybody. I just liked chillin on my mountain being rad as shit and sometimes showin off my

awesome magic for the ladies. Even callin myself the Dark Wizard was mostly about aesthetic. I'm chaotic neutral!"

"You should have told us earlier!" Rufio said, stunned.

"You wouldn't have believed me."

"We barley believe you now," Horuss pointed out.

"Exactly."

"So were you just toying with us all this time?" Rufio asked.

"Not toyin with ya," the bard/Dark Wizard said, shaking his head. "Testin ya! I've been lookin for someone ta help me get my powers and my castle back for half a sweep. But no one was gonna help some crazy scrub claiming ta be the Dark Wizard, not even a crazy scrub as hot as me."

Rufio had to admit he had a point. He certainly wouldn't have helped the bard if he'd told the truth.

"But I really think you two are strong enough ta take the evil spirit down and get me my powers back!" the Dark Wizard said excitedly. "And I can help. I know how ta get into the fort, and where I used ta keep all my rad magic items!"

Rufio looked to the centaur, who shrugged. He sighed.

"Alright," he said, and the Dark Wizard whooped with excitement. "It is my sworn duty to defeat the evil threatening the land, and if all of this has really been the spirit and not you, then I have no choice but to help you destroy it. But!"

He pointed a firm and very confident finger at the wizard.

"If you get your powers back and start doing evil stuff again I will totally come back and kick your butt!"

"Noted," the Dark Wizard said with a nod. "Now let's go get my stuff back!"

So they gathered their supplies, said their goodbyes, and stormed the Dark Fortress. It was a long, grueling session, fighting hordes of monster and undead, outwitting fiendish puzzles, narrowly escaping deadly traps. But at last they reached the throne room where the Dark Wizard was certain the Evil Spirit would be waiting. Rufio paused for a moment, took a breath, and then threw the door open, to the sound of maniacal, cackling laughter.

— —

Everyone at the table froze as a familiar, highly theatrical laugh filled Porrim's basement. All at once, the black curtain behind the DM was swept aside.

Aranea, in elaborate costume, sat on a chair which she appeared to have personally transformed into an evil throne through liberal and precise application of black paint, glitter, and cut outs of spider webs.

"It is I!" she declared. "The all-powerful dark spirit, The Countess Bellicose, Mistress of the Night, Scald of the Dawn! Terror of-"

"Wait, is this in character or out of character?" Rufioh interrupted.

"In character of course!" Aranea scoffed. "I'm building drama!"

"So you're playing the evil spirit?" Cronus asked.

"Obviously." Aranea gestured at her outfit as though that should have been clear.

"I was going to play the spirit," Porrim said, looking tired. "But Aranea messaged me last night because her 'character concept had evolved' and, well, she'd already decorated that chair and everything. I figured it couldn't hurt."

She looked like she was starting to imagine all the ways it could hurt, now.

Aranea cleared her throat and started again.

— —

"Mistress of the Night! Scald of the Dawn! Terror of the Deeps-!"

"Shut it, harpy!" Cronus interrupted. "You're nothin but a ghost with an overinflated sense of self-importance! Gimme my shit back!"

"Never!" the Countess declared. "I've done more with your powers than you ever could! Surely you've noticed how subtly I've destabilized the economy of this entire region? And with the money I make on weapon sales from the war I'm starting, I'll be able to buy this entire valley! Not a mere dark wizard, but a conquering queen! From this valley, I will seize the entire world!"

"Not if we can help it!" Rufio declared, drawing his sword.

— —

"Alright, roll for initiative," Porrim said, readying her own dice.

"Wait!" Aranea said, scandalized. "I'm not done!"

"I think you pretty much got your motives across there," Porrim said.

"No, I haven't even scratched the surface of the Countess's rich characterization yet!" Aranea said, reaching for a roughly phone book sized manuscript next to her chair.

— —

"I was born by the sea ten thousand years ago," the Countess said passionately. "The proud daughter of powerful warrior inhabited by the soul of a spider goddess and her half-tiefling half-aasimar consort, who betrayed and killed her when I was only a child, a betrayal that would only be equaled by what the Dark Wizard would do to me centuries later, after years of wandering with nothing but my mother's magic amulet and a giant wolf. But first, I must explain where my mother acquired the spirit of the spider goddess. You see in her home country it was customary to give the first born child to the gods in an elaborate ritual in which..."

— —

To their credit, they held out for about five solid minutes of unbroken monologue before Cronus broke.

"I roll to seduce the evil spirit," Cronus declared loudly, raising his dice.

"What?" Aranea said, blinking.

"Go," Porrim said immediately. "I'm giving you advantage based on your shared history."

"Hey-!" Aranea tried to interrupt.

"Can you even roll high enough to beat her save?" Rufioh asked.

"The ioun stone we got from the dragon gives me plus two," Cronus said as he, Rufioh and Horuss huddled over his character sheet. "And the Devil's Ego I enchanted my mandolin with is plus four, plus another four for the Righteous Aura on my hat, plus two for the Mertoran leaf I ate earlier- Porrim, is the Nixie's Grace still active?"

"Hasn't been ten minutes in game yet, so yeah!"

"Plus eight from the Nixie's Grace, on top of the base twenty charisma I have after reading the Tome of Leadership in the Gnoll Caves, whatever I roll will have +20."

"*What?*" Aranea's voice was rising to a frantic shriek.

"She'd have to make a charisma save, correct?" Horuss asked Porrim. "What's her charisma?"

Porrim grinned.

"Negative One."

"As long as you don't roll a one there's no way she can beat you!" Rufioh realized, excitement making his wings flutter behind him.

"This isn't fair!" Aranea wailed as Cronus threw down his d20.

The table fell dead silent as the die rolled. Time seemed to briefly slow to a crawl.

— —

Rufio released his sword in surprise as the bard suddenly stepped in front of him, pulling a single rose seemingly from nowhere.

"Countess, babe," he said, dropping to one knee. "You've misjudged me again! I didn't come here to banish you and take back my castle! I came to beg you to take me back! I wronged you and I been miserable without you all this time! Stop all this evil shit and come retire to the countryside with me. I love you, bitch! I ain't ever gonna stop loving you, bitch!"

The Countess fought it for a moment, then swooned into his arms.

"Oh, Wizard! I could never resist your beautiful singing voice! Marry me!"

— —

"I didn't say that!" Aranea shrieked. "My character would never say that!"

She was drowned out by Cronus hooting with delight and running victory laps around the table while playing the song from the end of *The Breakfast Club* on his palmbusk at max volume. Porrim,

Horuss, and Rufioh were laughing uncontrollably, Rufioh leaning against Horuss's shoulder as he shook. On the table before them, the D20 lay, displaying a victorious two.

Aranea sank pouting into her throne as Porrim wiped her eyes.

"Sorry hun," she said. "Don't worry. You can join the actual party for our next campaign."

Aranea perked up a little.

"I'm putting a word count limit on your back story though," Porrim added.

Aranea frowned, then shrugged.

"Fair."

When things calmed down, they cleaned up and said their goodbyes.

"See you guys next week?" Porrim asked.

"Definitely," Rufioh confirmed, glancing at Horuss, who nodded in agreement.

"Awesome," Porrim said. "Make new characters. I have an idea for something more contemporary that I think you guys are going to love."

They waved goodbye, walking away into the memory of a late afternoon, the insects singing in the tall grass. Time was fluid here. They'd find something to do for a little while and by the time they wandered back here it would be 'next week.' The trick was just not to think about the passage of time too much.

As they strolled along, through some human's fond recollection of a summer evening in a tidy little neighborhood, their footsteps quiet on the cracked sidewalk pavement, Horuss noticed Rufioh frowning.

"Is something the matter?"

Rufioh shook his head.

"Not really," he said, shrugging. "I guess... I'm just kind of sad to see our characters go. After spending all these weeks with them, it's weird to just... put them away."

Horuss nodded in understanding.

"They were certainly interesting vessels for certain facets of our personalities. And a very satisfying wish fulfillment fantasy in addressing certain issues of growth and achievement that we are prevented from ever attaining here in the bubbles."

"Right," Rufioh said with a small, sad laugh. "I guess it was pretty nice, to feel like I was being genuinely confident and heroic for a little while, rather than just, you know, smiling and pretending. Although, I guess, really, it's just another kind of pretending..."

Horuss was quiet for a moment and Rufioh wondered if he'd forgotten to listen again, the way he sometimes did. He'd been better about that lately, since Porrim had enforced strict turn orders to make sure everyone's character had a chance to talk.

"...I think, perhaps," Horuss said at last. "That it is important to pretend these kinds of things. Especially when they are out of reach for us in reality. To create out of nothing even a facsimile of the happy ending we wanted - and furthermore to do it together - I think that is something very impressive."

Rufioh's chest felt tight. He caught Horuss's hand on an impulse, and the other troll held it very, very carefully.

"So, I guess it's not like we're putting the characters away," he said, clearing his throat. "It's more like we're giving them their happily ever after."

"I believe they deserve that," Horuss agreed, his voice soft. The dreambubbles shifted around them, going quiet and fuzzy at the edges, darkness gathering like evening settling around them.

"And hey, maybe Porrim will let us bring them back for a sequel eventually!"

"I would like that. Very much."

— —

And so, the evil spirit and the dark wizard retired to the countryside, for all of perhaps five minutes before remembering how much they despised each other. After a messy divorce, the evil spirit was banished to the astral plane, and took the opportunity to search for the half-aasimar half-tiefling who killed her mother. The wizard started a band and went on tour.

The hero Rufio, his quest complete, felt at peace for the first time in a sweep. He stood on the same hill overlooking the village and pondered the future. He was unsure what he would do next. But hearing the sound of hooves galloping towards him, he knew that whatever it was, he would not face it alone.

Together, he and the centaur rode into the sunset, ready to face whatever new adventures awaited them.





Salihombox



by Solisen

STEP OUT OF THE SHADOWS

The smile on his face melted away for the first time in a long time. He had been told he didn't need to endure that pain.

"Do you ever think back on any of it?" Horuss said, his goggles catching the light as he pulled them off, pearl-white eyes on display. "I feel like you'd have to in one way or another. I can't blame you. I'd regret me too thinking back on these eons."

*

He wore the pale moonlight like a shroud. Pack slung over one shoulder, the weight unable to tug his posture out of alignment, Horuss moved in and out of the shadows, silent as a predator could be. He was on the hunt.

For scenery.

At times, when he was alone and the workload was more than he could handle, Horuss would curse, internally of course, about the wide breadth of his studies as dictated by his lusus and the adults tasked with his upbringing. Sometimes he would find no joy in epic poetry or in the differences between carving marble and carving clay. Had he just been able to hit the gym and tinker on some tech, he would have been happy.

Happy...

He scoffed, scaring a little bird out of the bushes as he squatted down and examined the ground, seeing if it was level enough for the equipment. There was nothing short of improperly handled equipment that could ruin this more. Setting his pack to the side, he surveyed his surroundings, lenses flashing a bit in the pale moonlight as he pulled out his sketchbooks and camera equipment, his mind replaying quickly the texts he had read about nature photography.

Lighting was important. The moments just prior to sunrise and just after sunset were some of the best times, especially if they coincided with particularly forgiving moon phases. He looked up at the thick crescent of the pink moon, nodding as he watched the trees sway some in the late night breeze, pulling up something chill and refreshing from the distant coastline.

He had ventured to these woods for a variety of reasons, chief among them being the lack of surrounding civilization to possibly distract him from the work at hand. His schoolfeeding was thorough and this semester was focused almost wholly on aesthetic visual arts. From engravings to nature photography, Horuss had done his best to get to this point.

Quiet.

With his tripod set up, his camera mounted, and every sketchbook sorted out, he hung his head, inhaling slowly and exhaling with a confident hiss. There was work to be done. To hunt down the proper angle, the proper scene, it would take some time and he was more than prepared to wait. No doubt there were interesting species of bird here to be found. Crouching down, muscles moving seamlessly, effortlessly, he was prepared to wait.

A flash of bronze overhead caught his attention.

*

"There are times, yes, where I recount those events leading up to our meeting," Horuss said with little interest in the conversation at hand. He and Rufioh were perched along some crag of rock on his dark and windswept planet. "But that does not mean I dwell, Rufioh."

"You dwell," Rufioh said, a snort escaping him as he lay there, watching the distant horizon.

"I do no such thing, you foolish troll," Horuss said. He nearly snapped the word, but any venom in the words was lost as that gloved hand held gently, gingerly, Rufioh's own. He picked up his binoculars with his free hand and sighed. "There's no sight of those monstrous constructs for at least three miles. We should get moving."

"Dwelling..." Rufioh teased, drawing out the syllables for added effect. "Just admit it."

Horuss caughtalogued his binoculars and glared at his mate, a flash shining over his goggles as he stood there, stoic and unyielding. "To reminisce on occasion is not to dwell. To dwell has a negative connotation, especially in how you say it."

"Nuh-uh."

"Cease."

Rufioh huffed, shifting as he sat up some and looked to his matesprit. "Things were easier back then. And you like your poetry and art too much to not pass up trying to gloss over my stupid outfits and tree-hives to make everything back then seem all pretty and cool and whatnot..." He teased. Of course he teased, but Horuss frowned, crossing his arms as they sat there in the dim light, high over a dusty plain stretching to the horizon.

"Do you really think so lowly of me, Nitram?"

Rufioh shook his head, laughing with a tremble of anxiety in his throat. "No... no it's not that babe..."

"Do you really think me so insecure with our history as to try and make it seem something it is not?" Horuss asked. "Do you think me so crass? So pompous?"

Rufioh bit his lip, avoiding an answer as his gaze cast elsewhere.

"Well?" Horuss asked once more.

A sigh escaped Rufioh. "Look. You... Horuss, I adore you. You don't make me worry about getting a big head. But that's because you're too busy with *your* handsome, smart, big head to leave any room for mine to grow."

Horuss blinked. There was a moment of silence, even more silent than usual on that desolate sgrub world.

Rufioh gulped. "I mean, it's not an inherently... bad thing. You know?"

Horuss blinked again.

"Horuss?"

"I think we may need to return to base and go over our findings on the terrain in a more hospitable location. Do you not agree, Nitram?" Horuss asked, rising stiffly.

Rufioh looked up at his mate, his secret love, his rock... "Horuss I didn't..."

"Quiet, Nitram. We must retire to a safer location. Up. Out of the dirt with you. Come now."

It was a moment before Rufioh shifted, rolling his shoulders, shaking out his wings, and standing up to stand in front of Horuss, head bowed in a little show of shame. "I'm sorry, babe. You know I don't think you're a bad person or—"

"Nor do I think unkindly of you." Horuss spoke with a sudden softness, something rare and often unseen. Rufioh held his breath. "But this is no place for us to discuss such things when there is the chance Damara is scouting my hive for you and there are a whole slew of monstrous constructs roaming this landscape. You may think I am pompous, Nitram, but right now we must think of your safety."

*

Rufioh had left with Damara some days prior. There was work to be done on their respective planets and the session had been stagnant for some time. He had suggested the 'break' to Rufioh, allowing him some time to cover his tracks and keep their trysts and liaisons and... their relationship...

Horuss reeled. His own thoughts were trailing off into silence as if his boyfriend were narrating them.

There came a ping. Looking up, his goggles seemed to catch the pink notification with unusual sharpness.

"Hey buoy, you there or do I gotta come over personally?"

Horuss straightened up, his mind refocusing in an instant, a sharpness returning to him. He cracked his knuckles with a perfected movement of his arms and hands, and got to his reply with the sort of speed and grace one got from relentless lessons as a child.

"Your Highness, I apologize for my possibly offensive 'ineptitude' in replying to your message in a prompt manner."

Horuss sighed a sigh of relief once he hit enter.

"Cut the ship." Meenah responded in an instant. "We don't need us none of this sheila dumb formal carp. Beforus is dead and gone. I'm the Royal Highness of absolute jack shit. Better than you? Sure. I'm better than the whole lot of y'all. But don't go bein a weird power bottom on trollian with me."

"Power... bottom?"

"Bitch," Menah's aggravated grumbles were noticeable even planets away. "You know what I mean."

Horuss paused for some time, unsure how to respond. Would he admit that he knew just exactly what she meant, what the reference was, and sully his reputation in front of the last Beforan Royal to exist in the universe? Or would he *lie* to said royal and attempt to save face.

"Can I help you with anything this evening, Your Highness?"

Perfect. Horuss was so proud of his realignment of the conversation at hand.

Meenah's furious typing could be heard across the session. Horuss was sure of it. Nonetheless, he waited, watching the little ellipses bounce as she formulated her reply in the chat window. His conversations with the esteemed, if not irritable Heiress were... few and far between. He knew that his own adherence and reverence for the caste system made her uncomfortable. But it was his duty to hold up that system, the impeccable system that had brought them not only through the apocalypse but also —

"I swear to Cod if you're putting on an internal monologue, Horseboy, I'm gonna come over there personally and kick your bass."

"I am doing no such thing, your Highness." Horuss was bad at lying, but found it so very much easier in text at the very least.

"Whatever." There came a lengthy pause. "You know your fairy boytoy is getting his canoodle on with his gutterblooded exchange student again? Thought you might care to know."

"What Mr. Nitram deign to do in his time spent outside of my presence if his and his alone."

"Cut the act," Meenah snapped. A video chat ensued with little warning and Horuss had little time to hide his furrowed brow and pulsing neck vein. "You and I both know the only reason you don't come right out and say you're in cahoots with the bishie mothafuck is cause you're too damned ashamed of dating anyone 'below' you or whatever nonsense it is you got festerin in your thinkpan."

Horuss did his best. He did. Glasses catching the glare of his husktop monitor, he tried his best to hide what raging emotion he felt dwelling deep inside and slowly, powerfully, building up. Under the desk

and out of sight, his fists clenched and unclenched, posing a threat to destroy his de-strengthening gloves.

"That, is not it. Not. At all." He replied through clenched teeth, wishing they had remained using text chat only. It was so much easier to hide and lie in text format.

"Oh?" Meenah cracked a smirk, leaning back in her chair, feet propped up, trident stretched out in her lap and glinting in the low light from her own husktop. "Fine. I'll humor you, sea biscuit. I'm bored as shell and might as well occupy myself somehow. *Why* is it you refuse to take a moment and open your eyes to the truth."

Horuss snorted, nearly clouding his webcam with steam considering how agitated he was getting. "I simply do not know what it is you are referring to, Your Highness."

"Oh come on, Ruf is playing you both like a demonic four-stringbox. Poor sucker doesn't know if he wants a damsel in distress or a knight in shining armor so he goes for both."

"That is not the case."

There was a crack in one of Horuss's gloves. A crackle of sparks and a small curl of steam escaped. He tried hard not to bite his lip and draw attention to his discomfort. And yet... yet he was clearly aware of the glint in Meenah's eyes on the other side of the screen.

"Go on. Tell me what the case actually is then. I command you, scrub, as Heiress of the Beforan throne."

Horuss' anger turned to sheer frustration. His face flushed blue and the glare of the computer screen on his glasses vanished, revealing a shadow of eyes that were more avoidant than attendant. Meenah seemed to know how to use her power, and when, and where, and effectively at that. She was under his skin. She knew it. With her fanged grin on full display and the gold of her trident hooking in the light, she was the epitome of a deranged Empress in the making if there ever was one.

Horuss didn't know whether to be fearful, resentful, or something else.

"I dare not compete for Rufioh's affections with Miss Megido." Horuss said, trying his damndest to remain level. "It would be most unfair to her and her delicate composition if I were to express and flex my clear superiority, both as a troll in general, and as Rufioh's ideal romantic partner."

Meenah's expression twisted into something akin to a smirk. The emotion expressed was a mix of 'da fuck?' and 'you're adorable' but Horuss didn't pick up on any of it. "Delicate composition? What are you, fucking sealious?"

Horuss sat up straighter. "That was quite a stretch for a pun, even for you, your majesty."

Meenah took her turn at being flustered and angry, though not nearly as contained as Horuss had managed. Her trident slipped off her lap, her legs flailed for a moment and she poked the webcam on her end of the chat. "Look here sweaty, my puns aside, all my points stand taller than you with that stick

jammed firmly up your nook. And if you think Megido is such a delicate flower, maybe we need to toughen her up for the sake of this damned game session? Hmmm? Thanks for bringing it to my attention. I know just what to do now.”

The screen went black. Meenah disconnected.

Horuss gulped, the sweat on his forehead streaming even more profusely than usual. He had done something. He did not know exactly what it was, but he could sense the first domino falling.

*

“How many puzzles does this gloomy planet even have, doll?” Rufioh asked, holding the rudimentary torch higher.

He and Horuss were deep in some cave system, the walls littered with runes and hieroglyphs, the passages long and winding and unrelenting. It had been several hours without stopping. It had been dim.

Horuss grunted. “It is to the best of my knowledge that I must tell you, I simply don’t know.”

Silence ensued.

Horuss did what he set out to do, on multiple levels. One, he was still busy studying the game’s more intricate motifs, the literal writing on the wall that alluded to prophecy and fate. On the other hand, he and Rufioh were separated from the crowd, from the glaring looks, the whispers, and the thinly veiled remarks said with snide and derision.

“Thanks again,” Rufioh said, his trailing tendency blending so seamlessly with the distant echoes from the cave. “For, you know... getting me out and about and away from all the fuss.”

“Clearly you needed it,” Horuss said with an unintentional snap. He turned to see Rufioh, gaze cast aside and hidden in shadow. His wings had drooped often, but not that low. His posture was piss poor, but not that caved in and defensive. Horuss blinked, his tone shifting softer. “I did too.”

He turned away from his palmhusk and the notes he was taking on the writing on the wall. Setting it all aside, he himself softened, steam escaping softly in little curls from a few points on his gloves and headgear. Pulling his goggles up and off of his eyes, he looked to his secret matesprit with an uncharacteristic... tenderness. Reaching out, he was careful, even moreso, as he traced his fingertips, and then his palm, along the contours of Rufioh’s cheek.

Rufioh looked up, both confused and sad. His eyes were always so very bad at giving him away. At least, to Horuss.

“It’s hard,” Rufioh said, his voice barely penetrating the dark. “I hate pretending I’m this perfect specimen. This... infallible...” He huffed, hands flailing for a moment and words failing him.

Horuss managed a soft, barely visible smile. "You know you need not put on a vocabulary above your station in order to impress me, love." He sighed. "You are as you are and an astounding contradiction is what I fell for. Do not trouble yourself trying to impress me."

Rufioh balked for a moment. "How is it you are the only person I know able to not put me on a pedestal?"

Horuss scoffed. "I don't know. Her Highness seems dearest on painting you in a horrid light as of late."

Rufioh fell quiet again. There were moments like this, close and shrouded in gloom with Horuss where he would find words hard. Instead of his sentences trailing off, his very thoughts seemed unable to even start. He huffed. "I don't know how much more I can deny it before it eats away at me. She puts it all... in such a poor light. Me... I'm like some creep to them all now."

"You know that is not true." Horuss said flatly. "Most whisperings I have detected is that you are a ladykiller and a hoofbeast-slayer all in one. That you are the only troll able to manage multi-partner quadrant systems. Though, I do not know if you are able to fill your other three quadrants adequately and that this might be your own way of acquiring multiple partners in our inherently polyamorous reproductive and romantic system..."

Rufioh blinked. "I don't know if I should be peeved that you suddenly just psychoanalyzed me, or that you're co-opting my habit of not finishing a thought."

Horuss snorted in his special, equine way, and bumped his head to his mate's. "I want to keep us to us; hidden, yes, but for our own sakes more than anything else. I know... even if it does mean unfortunate rumors and gossip courtesy of our team leader and her inexorable tendency to stir up dramatics, I still think it is best."

Rufioh looked down. He nodded. "But you're going... you're going to stay and weather the storm with me?"

Horuss scoffed and smiled again. "Of course. What kind of gentletroll would I be if I didn't do as much?"

*

There was fire in his eyes behind those tears. Horuss shook as Rufioh fell limp into his arms. There was nothing that could have prepared him for a moment like this, not even witnessing the apocalypse in all its fire, shaking, and destruction. He felt no breath in his chest. He felt nothing but a burning.

"How... how could she...?"

*

There was a cold indifference between the two of them. Damara held herself in the usual way, aloof and praising her boy toy, failing to grasp a civil tongue and no doubt using her language and her backwater accent to hide something from the rest of them.

Meenah had called a meeting of the twelve of them for some purpose or another. And for once, for once in his life, Horuss wanted to drop all pretenses and hold Rufioh by the arm, stake his claim, make it known, and push away from the blathering idiots and retreat hiveward.

But no. He couldn't do that. There were too many risks. So he simply stared, ice radiating from his blue tinted features as Damara mocked him in his silence. He had to hide everything. For their sake, he had to stay quiet.

*

"It's temporary, my love."

He prayed it were true. Horuss held Rufioh's tear stained face in his hands, the mess of robotics and equine anatomy sprawling out behind them. Horuss had one hell of a hard time keeping his tongue civil as he had carried Rufioh back to his hive, to his workroom, and did his absolute best to work some semblance of mobility back into his love. Sweat, blood, and tears were all present, from the both of them in fact.

"I look.... Horuss..." Rufioh said between garbles of static and tears. "I look like a monster."

"You're not a monster," Horuss, said, all gruff falling away, fading into nothing. "You weren't a monster with those wings. You weren't a monster running away from civilization to live in the wilds. You weren't a monster to hide me from everyone. You weren't a monster then and you're not a monster now."

Rufioh whirred, his long neck trying to thrash side to side, his head aching, his pain evident in his eyes flooded with tears and his brow knitted upwards. "I'm a m-monster."

Horuss held firm. Horuss held Rufioh firmly in his hands, careful not to bruise.

"You are more than a face on a hoofbeast, Rufioh Nitram. I swear on my honor." Horuss' thumbs, bare for the first time in their entire history together, caressed softly over the seam between metal neck and organic jaw. "You are alive. You are ambulatory. You are on a road to recovery."

"*Horuss,*" Rufioh gasped, pleading now, his vision lost behind a veil of tears. "Look at me. *Look at what I am.*"

Horuss blinked. He smiled softly and pressed his forehead to Rufioh's. "You are the love of my life. That is what I see before me."

Silence.

Horuss could sense the lingering dissatisfaction with the answer, close like this or otherwise. He pulled back and composed himself as best he could. "I also see two thirds of a handsome cybernetic centaur in the making. All I need to do now is devel a secondary, trollish torso to connect the haunches with the face of an angel."

Rufioh blinked. Looking up, a glimmer of orange electrical lights in his eyes, one of many keeping him alive, he sniffed. "1... Okay. But only... only because 1 know you're try1ng to help."

*

"She keeps talk1ng about some sort of game...": Rufioh said, fluttering back and forth among the tree branches, attempting to keep pace with Horuss as he realigned his bow now and again. "I told her you were try1ng to help tra1n me 1n mart1al arts, doll, but 1 th1nk she only 1s, you know..." Rufioh's smile twisted, fangs on full display, his tongue poking out for a moment.

Horuss lowered his bow and stopped the barrage of dummy arrows he had Rufioh dodging. "Captor?"

Rufioh snickered. "She may g1ve you gr1ef now and aga1n, babe. You know... for even talk1ng to me."

"But she also holds conversat1ons w1th you, N1tram."

"Yeah... yeah." Rufioh rolled his eyes. "But 1 meant the goo-goo eyes she g1ves M1tuna. Whenever he does a k1ckfl1p l1ke the rad dude he 1s, she just... She looks at h1m l1ke you look at me when 1 do a freak1ng p1rouette of a tree branch."

Horuss blushed, hand tightening around his bow, the thing snapping. He huffed, snorting with a blue flush and a crinkled brow. "I do not know what you're implying, Nitram."

Rufioh laughed, floating down from on high, cast in a pink moonglow as he drifted... as he pulled close to Horuss in all his stuffy frustration. "You know what 1 mean, doll."

"I must insist that no, in fact, I do not, Nitram."

"Yes you do."

Horuss snorted. "Cease."

"Why? Cause 1'm so r1ght 1t's put you to shame."

Horuss tossed his bow to the side and pointed, an angry finger jutting upward, dangerously close to Rufioh's chin and the patch of scruff there. "Look here, Mr. Nitram, I do not like what you are insinuating, but it is far below me and I do not appreciate such blasphemy against me."

Rufioh snickered and floated upward, his wings buzzing wildly.

"What is this all about now, Nitram? Get down here."

"Nah." Rufioh grinned, leaning in to hover directly over Horuss, nose to nose. "You're too beneath me."

*

They sat in silence, watching the void beyond the edge of the bubble, watching it swirl in all its uniform emptiness. Rufioh gulped, white eyes focused on, well, nothing actually. It was the void after all. Every

sense of time had vanished from their afterlives. Had it been minutes or decades since he and Horuss went on this attempt of a picnic.

"You know I was never as confident as everyone says," Rufioh said, not moving, not breaking his gaze from the void.

"It's a secret I knew, yes," Horuss said. "And you knew more about me than anyone, and I never had to say anything to you."

They both nodded and remained quiet for some time.

"You didn't idolize me like some golden calf."

"And you took my snobbery in stride. You knew I had to persist with it because no one else was about to preserve any single aspect of our culture and our home when we got out of the game."

The both of them snorted. "Look how far that got us," Horuss said. "I was a Renaissance man for nothing. Just like the game decided."

Rufioh shook his head. "That's not true."

Horuss let out one harsh laugh, head tossing back, goggles flopping up over his forehead. "You were the only person to give a single iota of care for me, Rufioh," he said. "I was nothing to anyone. I was simply a thorn in Megido's side and a plaything for her Royal Highness in her moments of boredom."

Silence followed. Again. It had a habit of following Horuss around like a shadow. "We were all playthings," Rufioh finally said, moving to hold a hand to Horuss's shoulder, gently pulling him close, careful of his horns, to rest his face to the big blueblood's shoulder. "That's what the game did. That's the story here, isn't it? Especially now in these bubbles... Right? We're just playthings."

Horuss pulled back and frowned, a genuine expression of sorrow, and not his usual grumpiness. "No."

Rufioh scoffed. "You know how you felt at the beginning. The 'lurid and scandalous nature of these trysts' or whatever it was, you used to say, doll." He snickered. "I don't mind. We had fun and..."

"No." Horuss repeated with a firmness and finality that put a stop to their staring at the void. "You were not a plaything."

Rufioh hung his head for a moment.

Horuss gently picked it up with a fingertip and an uncharacteristic gentleness. "Listen to me, and listen to me well, Mr. Rufioh Nitram."

Rufioh pulled back and folded his arms, wings cocooning gently around himself. "I had to hide. You wanted us to hide, doll. It was all a private game."

Horuss clenched a fist. "Listen," he said, voice trembling as he suppressed his anger. "I am an apostle of void, especially according to this game. I like my privacy, Rufioh. And it comes with the territory of knowing me intimately. I make love with the lights off. I kiss you in the shadows of the trees and your other lovers. I take a backseat to the rest of your life. Because you _have_ one."

Horuss trembled. Rufioh could feel a welling of ache radiate from him.

"I have... I have hobbies. I have skills. I have the art history of our entire species crammed into my pan as if I were some digitized archival library and responsible for every last dotted 'i' and crossed 't.' I have..." He sniffed, pushing back all the upsurge of emotion and beating it back. "I have you. I have you and robots everyone thinks are creepy and a knack for nature photography because my lusus absolutely insisted upon it. I have you and a knowledge of carving marble, granite, limestone, and obsidian. I have you and the scorn and disgust of every other team member we have because of my manner of speech and the nature of my perspiration."

"Horuss..."

"No. Listen. Please. I don't speak often," Horuss said, wringing his hands. "I keep my secrets and I keep yours too. I have opinions and talents our team ignores. You even ignore..."

*

Meenah held a bomb like it were just another one of her cakes. Rufioh would have fallen to his knees had it not been for Horuss and his solid grip. They held close. They held tight. They whispered sweet nothings as they stared down the real possibility of becoming nothingness themselves.

Horuss didn't feel anything akin to fear.

He was told to prepare for nothingness for so long.

At least he could provide Rufioh some solid comfort in these last moments.

*

"I made a stupid decision," Horuss said, setting his goggles down, blue tears in white eyes. "I made a stupid decision to stay hidden with you and I stuck with it because I was stubborn and full of myself. But I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought if I made you choose between me and Megido, you'd run off instead of being faced with a choice like that."

They had just gone on a picnic, and now Horuss was unloading something so personal and secretive, it would likely leave him with nothing... nothing to hide from Rufioh any longer.

"Horuss..." Rufioh said softly, pulling close, wrapping his wings around the two of them. "You didn't... have to..."

"No." Horuss covered his face. "I wanted to. I wanted to protect you from being confronted with

something that would make you run away like you ran away from civilization or any responsibilities. Somewhere deep inside of me I had tricked myself into thinking I could perhaps trick you into maturing and making a decision for yourself. I didn't want to push you in any one direction. I am supposed to be better than a relationship with someone on the opposite end of the homospectrum. I would have survived if I had lost out in the end. I told myself that over and over. And yet... I wanted..." He sniffed and shook his head. "Deep down... I knew you wouldn't choose me. I was *nothing* to anyone, Rufioh. Why would you be any different? I would be alone again and I would mean nothing to no one. I was, as you've said so many times before, 'a prick' with so much working against me."

"Hor..."

"She was pretty and exotic and worshipped the ground you walked on. She liked your games and your clothes and your anime. She had other friends. She had cosplay and could teach you more East Beforan than any highblooded schoolfeeding." Horuss shook his head again, hair all mussed up now. "I had nothing but a bunch of useless art and poetry and stuffy *crap* they put in museums because nobody wanted it out in public. I had nothing for you."

Rufioh, despite his caste disadvantage, pried Horuss' hands away from his face. "You stop this right now, doll. You know I'm not into any of that convoluted, uh, what's the word... role reversal nonsense."

Silence. Horuss blinked.

"You trained me to walk tall and get tough," Rufioh said. "I know everyone kinda expected it of me, but you gave it to me. I know I was... kinda hesitant. And wishy washy. But, dude, you know that's the kind of person I am. You made me a weird hoofbeast thing for a little while, but then I was the most awesome gundam centaur that anime was too damned scared to make happen. Do you know how cool that was for a while? Yeah, I got alternates out there stuck as some weird... hoofbeast... 'thing' on all fours. And they seem hella depressed. But that wasn't the end of me. For us. You know? You taught me how to fight. How to stand up for myself." Rufioh inhaled sharply, seeming as if he were trying to steady himself a bit more. "So, you know... shut up and let me say one more thing. Ok?"

Horuss nodded slowly.

Rufioh accepted it and punctuated his point with a firm kiss and. After a few lingering moments, mouth to mouth, nose to nose, Rufioh pulled back, slapped Horuss across the face. Horuss balked for a moment. The sting was minimal. The gesture was a maximum effort though and it left him speechless.

"I, as you know, am an idiot... I know. Okay, doll? I know. But I saw that I move once and I thought it might snap you out of whatever bologna you got going on up in your pan." Rufioh huffed and frowned. "And yeah, I say some shit. I flip flop a lot. I'm a jerk. But that doesn't mean I don't appreciate you, dingus. I wouldn't be half the troll I am without you... You're not nothing."

*

"You are in possession of a mutation that results in wings."

Rufioh cocked his head to the side, his gaze down to the ground, his cheeks flushed with bronze. "And you, uhm... are sure in possession of a funny way of pointing that out."

"I am, actually, in possession of many skills and talents cultivated over sweeps of dedication, persistence, and practice. I am to be the epitome of a well-rounded nobleman."

Rufioh grinned, his wings folding closer still to his body. "Are you trying to seduce me with your resume, dollface?"

Horuss scoffed. "That is absolutely ridiculous," he said with a series of huffs. "As if I were to try and seduce some vagrant runaway with poor fashion choices and a questionable method of hiding his mutation that resulted in wings."

The statement was met with a blink. "And what's that supposed to..." he paused to throw up some air quotes. "Mean?"

Horuss could easily have devolved into a lecture about binding affecting one's bones and muscle development, but he restrained himself. Instead, he approached the admittedly handsome stranger and, with quick hands, corrected his posture. "You have much potential, lowblood. Do not hinder yourself."

*

"Don't sell yourself short, Horuss," Rufioh said, pushing him back, flat against the picnic blanket on the ground. He straddled his chest and poked the blueblood's nose, relishing just a moment how cool to the touch it was against his skin.

Horuss inhaled gently despite being a ghost, air rolling around in his lungs and both warming him, and snapping him up out of his depressed stupor. He gently, carefully, gingerly began to push Rufioh up and off of him.

"And what of the game?" he said, a sniff at the end punctuating the thought. "It told us all what we were. What journey we needed to complete for ourselves. What we were to be. And I was destined, fated, programmed by this game construct, to be the literal embodiment of nothing."

"And?" Rufioh asked, laughing. He waved a hand through the air and rubbed his neck, clearly a bit distressed by some of the logic in that argument.

"And..." Horuss closed his eyes. "You were to be a bastion of freedom, communication, growth. The aspect of breath... it has no place next to the aspect of nothingness. Of darkness. Of secrets."

"Yeah. Cool. And just cause we ended up inside a video game that made us try and act as pals for some cosmic frog trying to have a kid, doesn't mean it's gonna be the definition.... Definition." He bit his lip. "I'm not real good at this. Aranea was better at all that narration shit."

Horuss snorted, a hiccup cutting him off as he covered his face again.

"I tried so hard. I tried my absolute best, Rufioh. And I know you want a break. I know you want your freedom to be your own person. I know. You can't hide secrets from me when you can talk so freely with everyone else and have them listen." Horuss rubbed his eyes. Looking up, he tried, and failed miserably, to keep his composure. "I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to. I want you to have the spine to make your own decisions. I want you to be happy. Even if it's without me."

There was a serious pause between them, the air growing still and chill. Ruioh reached out, covering Horuss' hand with his own.

"You keep telling me you're nothing, right?" he asked.

Horuss nodded.

"Well..." Rufioh chewed on his words for a moment. "How can a guy be free of nothing?" He smirked. "I can be free of secrets. Sure, doll. Yeah... from time to time I want a break. But it's been eons. We're dead. Technically. I think. There's a lot of confusion since... you know... Meenah decided it would be a blast to go and bomb us."

The two of them snorted, suppressing a laugh over the wordplay in the air now.

"You were endowed with wings, my beloved, bronze fae," Horuss said softly. "I do not wish to be the one to clip them."

*

Ghost's didn't require sleep. Memories didn't require trauma or pain, or even change for that matter. And yet, they slept anyway. They talked it over anyway. Rufioh and Horuss lay together in some distant bubble in some distant corner of the void and when they awoke, there was a difference in the air. The winds had changed.



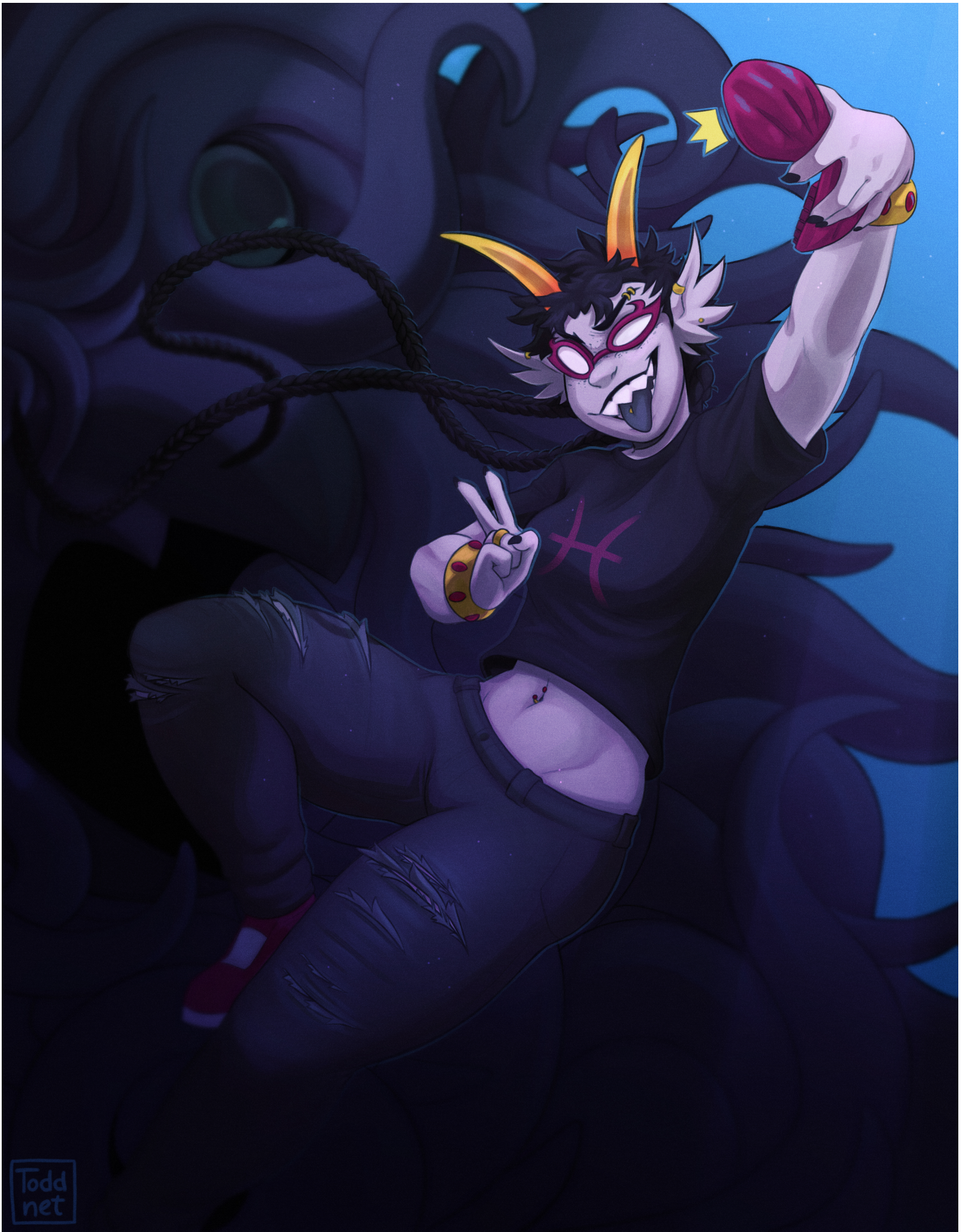
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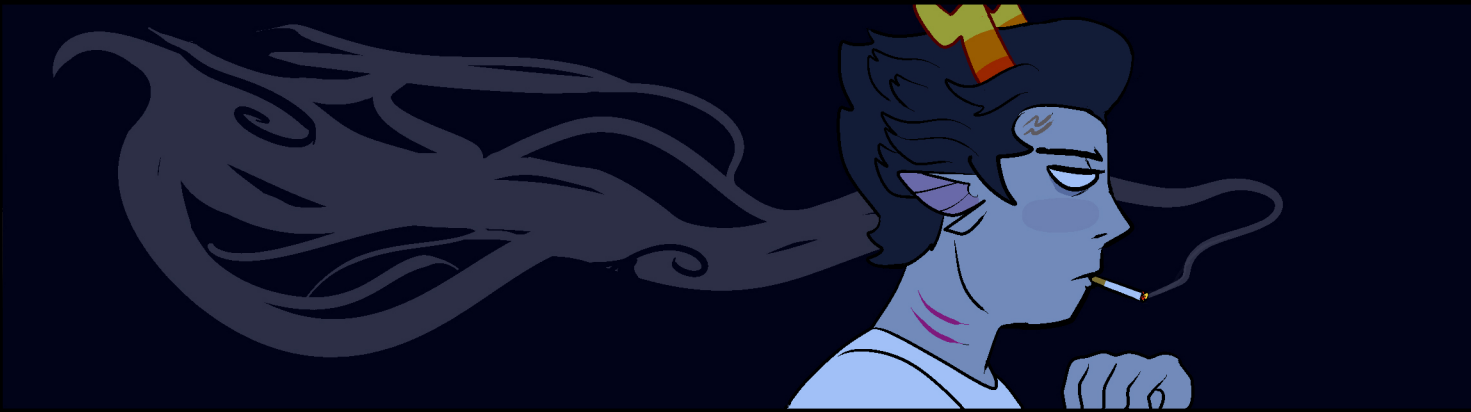
Salihombox 好











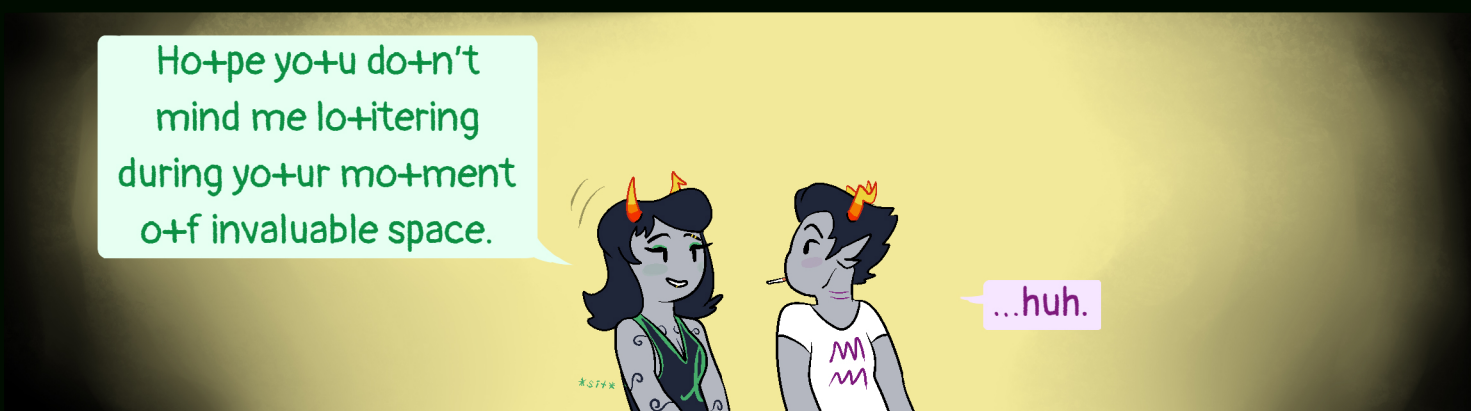
huffing like a top notch
alien before vve gotta
scram to get
scrambled.

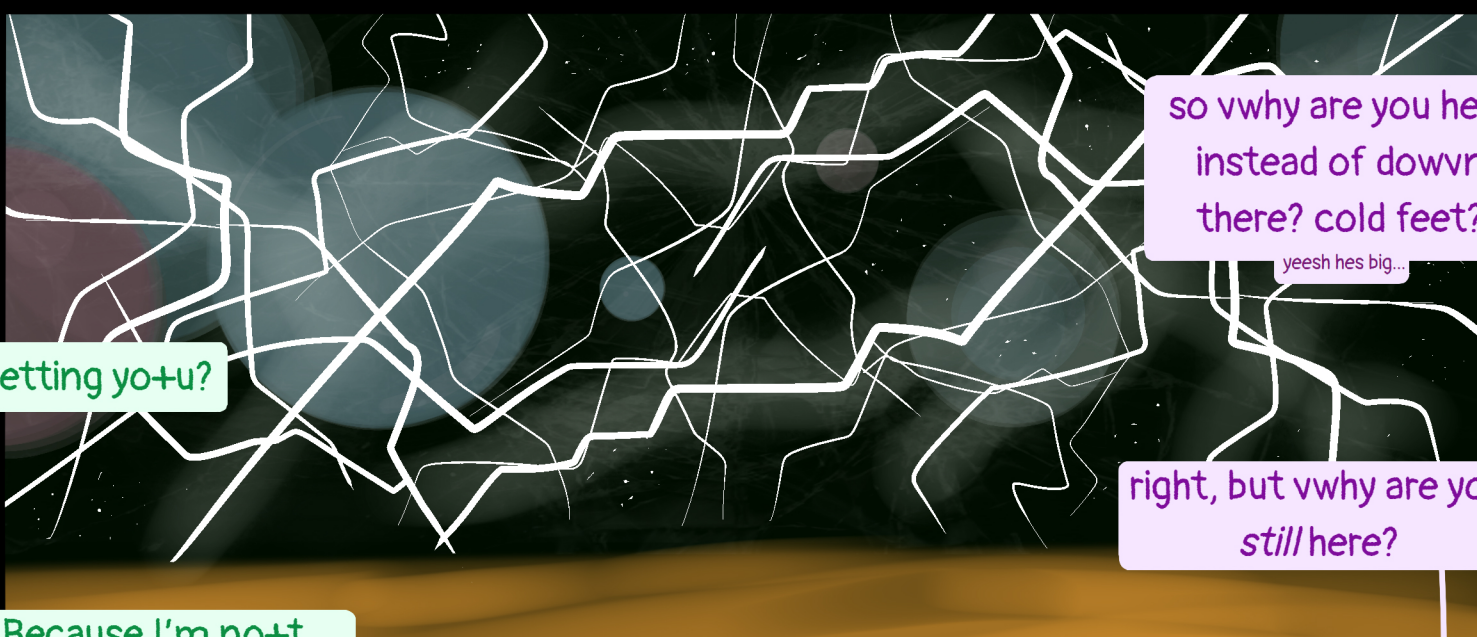


aight.



yeah, i knowv, por.
ill catch up soon.





Getting yo+u?

so vwhy are you here
instead of down
there? cold feet?

yeesh hes big...

right, but vwhy are you
still here?

Because I'm not
entirely lacking o+f a
blo+o+d pusher.

I assume yo+u're not
o+ver here sulking at
the pro+spect o+f
dying a virgin.

oh?



oof. harsh, but
observwant, toots. call
me flattered for the
eyeballing.

call me absolutely
tickled that my pailing
tier and its relevwance
struck a chord for you
to pluck on!

Cro+nus-



vwere gonna die,
porrim.

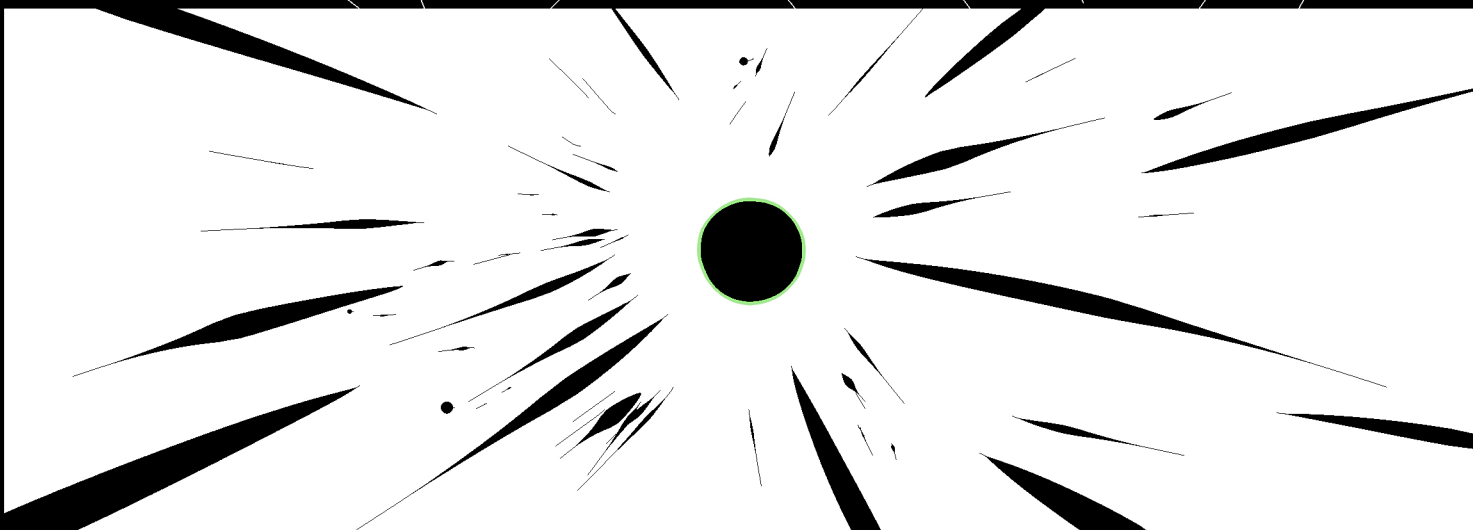
like, double die.



man, this fucking
blows; vwhat vwas
the point....?

Mmm?

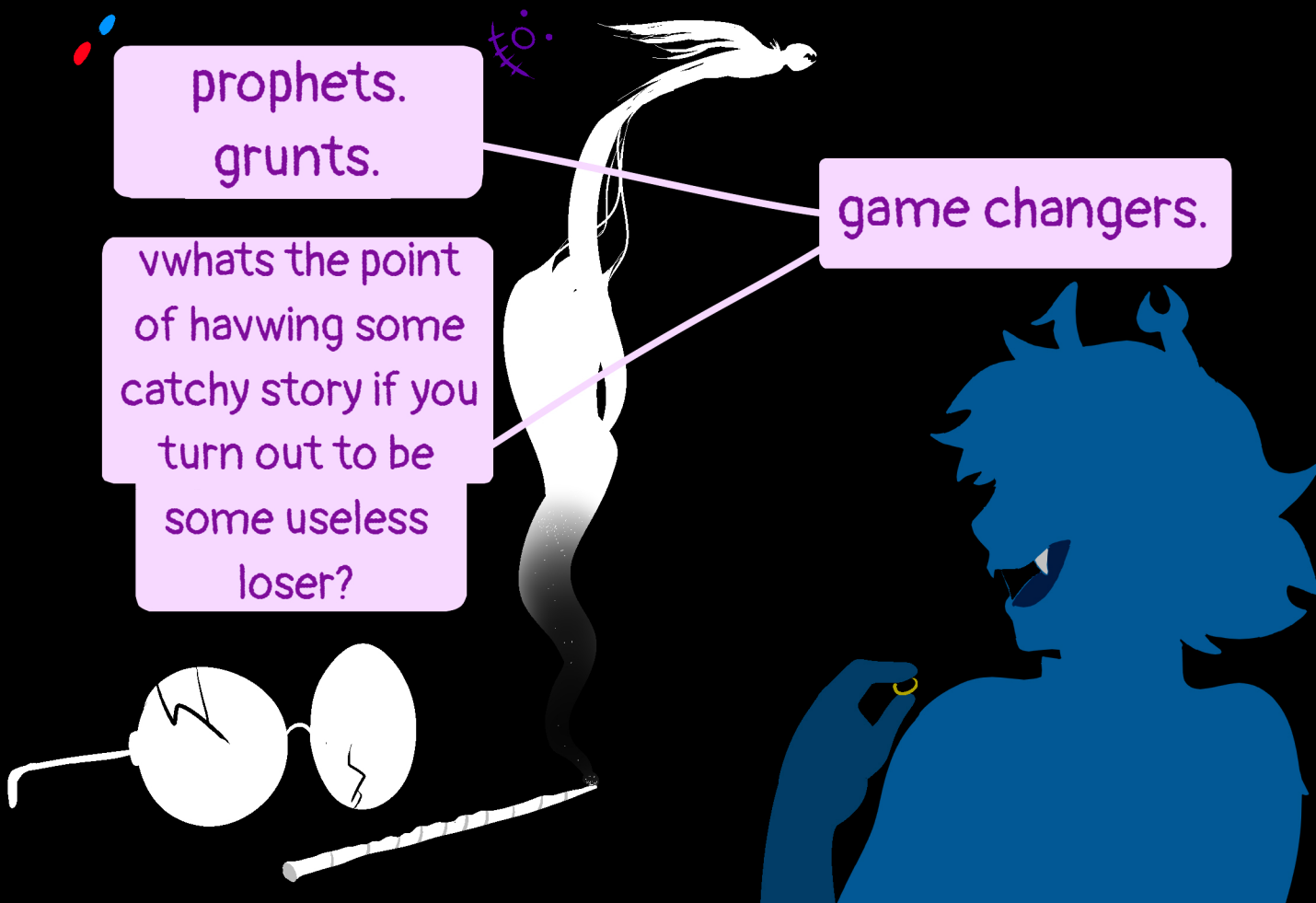
vwe all had important roles, right?



prophets.
grunts.

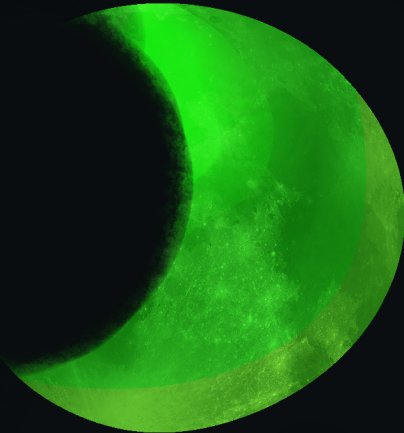
vwhats the point
of havwing some
catchy story if you
turn out to be
some useless
loser?

game changers.





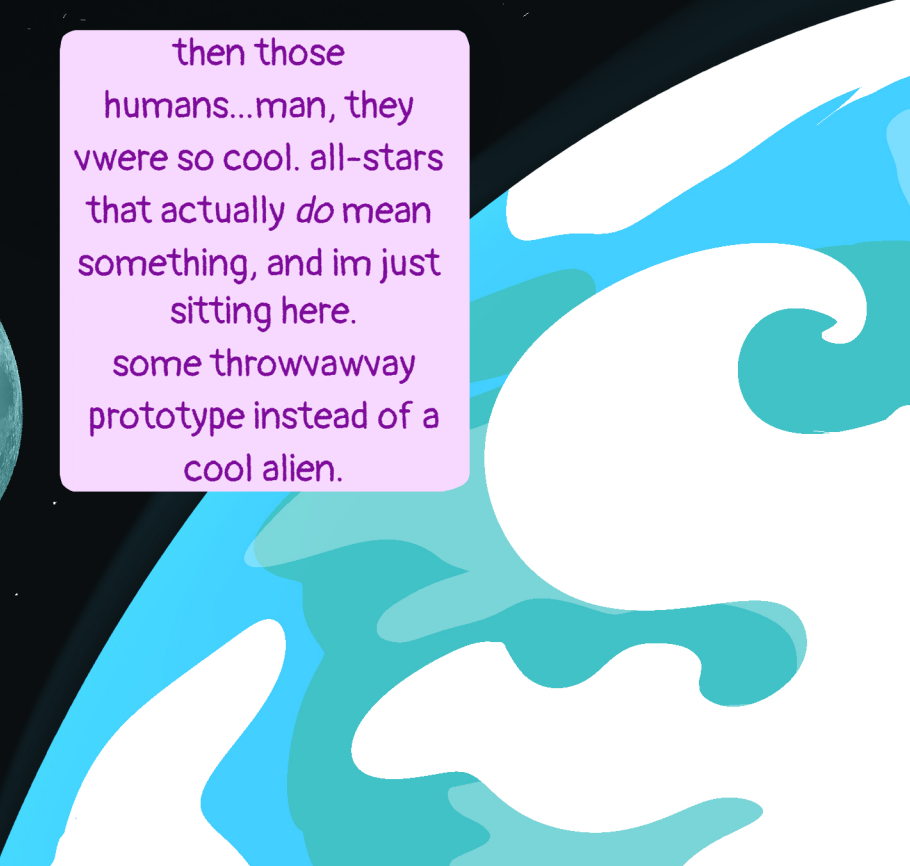
vwe all got our sales
pitches; our little
stories to sway the
crowd. our promises
that vwe vwere going
to steal showv as the
twelvwe bodacious
hotties met to savwe
evverything.
to havwe some
purpose?



then bam, shovwed
into dead space like
chumps. nevwer stood
a chance at meaning
much.
the limelight vwas
passed to our lack of
fuck ups.



then those
humans...man, they
vwere so cool. all-stars
that actually *do* mean
something, and im just
sitting here.
some throwvawvay
prototype instead of a
cool alien.



and its like, vwowv,
vwhat if vwed been
destined for that
univwerse instead?

less horns, more
think pans.

less hanging
around,
regurgitating the
same shit, and
more doing
something.

meaning
something.

fated to be something
other than stepped on
stones thatll croak.
again.

sucks globes.



That's lo+aded bullshit.

Tho+ugh leave it to+ an
Ampo+ra to+ make a
situatio+n dry.



I prefer the
Mothergrub's
Endpoint Path instead
of being compared
to a rock. The humans
latch onto it in a way
called the butterfly
effect.
We all played some
part that struck
importance within
our existence; within
Sgrub. We provided
paths upon the
universes that
ultimately learned
from us and bettered
themselves and their
own problems by the
end of all this. It's
teamwork.
The humans you co-
over wouldn't even
exist without our
session.





||

We sucked in our own pretentious ways, but we still provided.
We made our own stories and memories with each other.



We made new ones along the way.

We still stood until
the end, whether facing
death's door for a
final time, or cheering
on our universal
prodigies.



We never became useless. We simply passed on the torch.

We gifted them with
space to+ flo+urish,
and *ho+pe* to+ stride
fo+rward.

Even if we're no+ center stage, we're
the suppo+rting cast.

Even if they're
here after us,

they weren't here
befo+re us.

If we meant
so+omething, then
we mean
so+omething.

And so+metimes
that's eno+ugh to+
go+ o+ut with a bang.



thats fair.

END

END of ZINE!



